



*Two Complete Stories*

*H. E. Bates*

*William Sansom*

# THE CORNHILL MAGAZINE

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SUPPLEMENT No. 1

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THE GRASS GOD

*by H. E. Bates*

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EPISODE AT GASTEIN

*by William Sansom*

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JOHN MURRAY, 50 ALBEMARLE STREET, LONDON, W.1

It is hoped that this may be the first of a series of occasional *Cornhill Supplements*, published independently of the usual quarterly issues of the CORNHILL but counting as an issue as far as subscribers' subscriptions are concerned. Each issue will contain the work of one or of two authors, either fiction or non-fiction, varying from 15,000 to 35,000 words.

For many authors, whether new or established, this is often a natural length for plot or subject, but it is normally too long for magazine publication and too short for separate publication in book form. This gap, formed in part by a subsidence in the economics of the publishing scene and the difficulties of magazine distribution, is a deterrent to authors whose creative or sensitive talents may make padding or condensation impossible. It is this gap which the CORNHILL hopes in a modest way to fill. Of the existence of such a gap there can be no doubt; of the need or possibility of filling it, only authors on the one hand and the response and support of the reading public on the other can decide.

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[The Editor asks that all contributions should be addressed to him at 50 Albemarle Street, London, W.1, and accompanied by a stamped envelope.

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# *The Grass God*

BY H. E. BATES

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## *The Grass God*

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WHEN he stepped off the platform after another of those tiresome and long-winded village meetings in which people had argued for nearly two hours about the repairs of a little bridge, he was pleased to see that everybody stood up again. He might have been a bishop leaving church. Some of the men, even the younger ones, touched their bare heads with their hands.

With amazement he could hardly bring himself to realise who and where he was. This was not the Russia of serfdom; it was not Ireland or Spain. He was not a bishop and these were not so many black peasant crawling beetles. This was England and these, he thought amazedly, were his people. They lived in his houses, paid his rents and—if it were not too harsh a term in these enlightened days—worked for him, in his fields, on his four thousand acres.

‘Good night, everyone,’ he said. Before putting on his black homberg hat—he had been to town all day and Spring, enervating and sudden, had been rather exhausting there—he lifted it slightly. ‘Good night.’

‘Good night, Mr. Fitzgerald, sir,’ they said. Here and there a voice or two, he thought, said, ‘Thank you.’ He walked up the aisle between the chairs. ‘Good night, sir. Good night.’

In the last fraction of a second before his hat touched his head he saw, in the last row of chairs, by the door, the girl who had been watching him so closely throughout the meeting.

She was sitting in the far corner, alone, leaning her bare arms on a chair in front of her. In the entire hall she was the only person not standing up. When he had first noticed her it was for an entirely opposite reason—during his speech she had not once sat down: as if perhaps, he could not help thinking, she had wanted to see him better. During all that time he had seen her framed against the back wall, smoky-brown eyes watching him from under the yellow scarf tied across her head.

With some annoyance he thought that he did not like women who wore scarves on their heads; it was one of those sloppy, frowsy, wartime habits from which his wife never recovered. But as he

looked at the girl she shook her head with a short upward toss so that the scarf fell free. He saw that she was quite young. Loosely the scarf fell about her neck like a kerchief and all the mass of her short thick brown hair was tousled free into a shining and fluffy ball, like the fur of a cat caught in a sudden wind.

She looked at him coolly, with a touch of arrogance that caught him off his guard. He felt a second touch of annoyance—Spring had really been rather too much in London—and something made him raise his homberg hat. She did not speak or move in reply. He was not even absolutely sure if she let herself be aware of that abrupt and quite courteous raising of the homberg hat. It was queerly impulsive on his part and it was all over in a second. He simply felt a small stab of anger and excitement go straight up through his throat and the next moment he saw that she was staring at the floor.

Outside he walked some distance before realising how warm and beautiful the evening was: that the oaks, merely sprigged with buds a week ago, were now in full flower, lovely tasselled curtains of olive-yellow, already browned at the tips by the great burst of sun. All among them, too, down the road, big hawthorns were in solid pillowy white blossom, and he could smell the heavy vanilla fragrance of them as it weighted the warm wind. Spring seemed suddenly to have rushed forward, too warm, too leaf-rich, too flowery, out of the cold tight distances of a week ago. Luxuriantly the tender and dark, the sharp and misty shades of green had been kindled down the little valley, alder with beech, oak over hornbeam, all along the river and all across the wide tree-broken park to the line of white-cliffed hills that flared with miles of beeches.

He could not decide for some moments which way to go home. He stopped, looking for a little while at the country about him, the fresh spring world that seemed to be nothing but a series of wonderful fires of green and white quivering under the blue May sky.

He decided at last to go by the river. He had permanently locked the gates to the park some time ago. He carried the key of course: but the other way, by the small white bridge, where the river flowed shallow and bright through tunnels of purple alder and then into and out of a long, lily-padded lake, was very beautiful.

Running footsteps down the road behind him made him turn and look back as he opened the gate to the field; and a figure calling 'Sir, sir' in a sort of enlarged whisper came up by the wood.

'Yes, Medhurst,' he said, 'what is it?'

Dark, almost swarthy, with the tight southern forehead that was obstinately unpleasant, almost foreign, Medhurst touched his cap and said :

‘ I wanted a word with you, sir. If it’s convenient, sir.’

Thick and unctuous and drawling, the voice had a touch of polite treachery in it that once again set Fitzgerald on edge. He had never quite got used to this foreign southern obstinacy, a feeling of treachery behind the politeness, the kow-towing, the touched hat.

‘ It was about the cottage, sir.’

‘ Cottage ?’

‘ You remember you said you’d have one free in April, sir.’

‘ You must speak to Captain Fawcett,’ he said. It was Fawcett’s job to deal with this sort of thing ; Fawcett was estate bailiff and it was entirely his business.

‘ It’s no use speaking to Captain Fawcett, sir.’

‘ Oh ?’

‘ He’s terribly off-hand, sir. He’s going to do this and he’s going to do that and he never does.’

‘ I’ve never had any cause to think that Captain Fawcett was like that——’

‘ I’m living in a hut, sir,’ Medhurst said. He stood tense, rather upright, glowering, almost menacing, it seemed, out of pure nervousness. ‘ We got no water. We have to go half a mile for water——’

‘ Where is this ?’

‘ Down by Sheeracre, sir.’

‘ I never knew there was a hut there.’

‘ No, sir ? It was the old shooting hut. It used to be half-way round the long beat. They used to have the shooting lunches there in the old days.’

‘ Wood or something ?’

‘ Wood and tile, sir. It’s half-tidy hut——’

‘ Then what are you cribbing about ? There are thousands who haven’t even huts.’

He half-turned away, curt with fresh annoyance. He heard Medhurst begin ‘ It’s the water, sir. It’s fetching the water for the baby, sir,’ and then down the road, a hundred yards or so away, he saw the girl again, coming towards him. She was taller than he had thought. She was swinging the yellow scarf, first in one hand and then in the other, so that it flapped about her long slender legs almost like a bright apron in the sun.

Watching her, unaware of Medhurst, really not listening now, he experienced once again the curious stab of excitement in his throat. She walked with long supple strides, idly swinging herself a little from the waist, with a gliding easy movement of slender thighs.

'We had the tap froze up fourteen or fifteen times this winter. My wife was bad. We couldn't bath the baby——'

He nodded vaguely, as if really listening. He was aware only, at that moment, of the sharp and hollow noise made by the girl's footsteps as it beat up into the ceiling of thickening branches. Down through the wood, at the same time, the evening air was full of a warm throaty whistling of several blackbirds, lovely and bell-like, and beyond it the bubbling call of a cuckoo on the wing.

Presently as she came level with him he again made his own quick impulsive gesture with the homberg hat; and this time he thought he saw perhaps the slightest flick of her face in answer. Then she went past, still swinging the scarf in her hands, so that from the back the ends of it moved outwards from her long thighs like two yellow fins.

He was still thinking of how much taller and much more supple she was than he had first supposed when Medhurst said:

'Well, have I to speak to Captain Fawcett, sir?'

'I suppose so. Yes: of course.' What was one to say? On the whole estate there were a hundred and twenty people to house and now, after the war, as things were, it was very difficult to make up one's mind not to—'I don't want to show favouritism,' he said. 'You understand?'

'You said the cottage up by the Thorn would be empty, sir——'

'Well, it may be. It may be. You must ask Fawcett. It's really his affair.'

'Yes, sir.'

Fitzgerald began to walk away: not, as he had intended, through the field, by the wood side, but along the road, towards the gates of the park.

'If you don't come to some arrangement with Captain Fawcett you must speak to me again.' He was simply talking automatically as he walked away. 'But after all it's a roof. Summer's coming on and you'll probably have to make do——'

'Yes, sir,' Medhurst said. 'Good night.'

'Good night.'

The thought of Medhurst went out of his mind swiftly, a moment later.

A hundred yards away the girl stood trying the gates of the park. He heard the hollow clatter of the iron handle. Once again an echo of the sound she made beat up into the curtain of spring leaves and again a whole chorus of blackbirds broke into singing in the wood and a cuckoo, answered now by another, called in a mocking, floating sort of voice far down along the meadows.

Twenty yards away he called to her :

'I'm afraid the gates of the park are locked. I'm afraid there is no footpath now.'

She turned slowly and looked at him.

'There used to be. There always was.'

It struck him that there was a kind of accusation in that. Her eyes, dark and warm, like elongated buds, did not seem quite open. They held him in a narrow sleepy stare.

He had again already raised the homberg hat ; now he took it off completely.

'It has been closed for more than a year. Nearly two years,' he said.

'It was always open.'

'At one time, yes.' Her long fine-skinned hands did swift little twisting tricks with the scarf. They reminded him of the mesmeric habit of a conjurer. He said : 'One has frightful bother with people. They abuse things. Trippers and all sorts of people used to come here and do Heaven-knows-what damage——'

'It's an awful pity,' she said. 'It's very beautiful——'

He felt for the bunch of keys in his pocket.

'Did you want to go in ? Were you thinking of walking through ?'

'I was.'

'I could let you through. I'm going through myself——'

There was no change in the elongated drowsy stare of the eyes as she said : 'After all I think I'll walk back. It's late and perhaps there isn't time.'

'It simply isn't any trouble. I have the key. I always carry the key.'

He held his keys, a big silvery bunch, in one hand, trying to pick out the gate-key with the other. He had thirty or forty keys in the bunch. He knew it was a longish, clumsy sort of key.

She stood apart, waiting, watching him try first one key and then



another, not speaking. He tried five keys that did not fit and then she said :

'So many keys and not the right one.'

'One uses it so rarely, that's the trouble——'

He clashed one key after another into the lock. Now his hat had become a nuisance to hold and he put it back on his head. He tried still another key but that too did not fit and he thought that, over his shoulder, she gave a short dry laugh, no louder than a gasp ; but she was simply staring, drowsy as ever, when he turned and looked at her.

She began to say again that it did not matter ; but he shouted through the gates towards the small gothic-windowed gate-lodge on the other side :

'Smith ! Are you there ? Smith ! Are you there ?'

A little knot-haired woman in a grey apron came running out of the house, a minute later, with the key.

'I'm terribly sorry, sir. I'm most terribly sorry. I didn't know. I didn't hear you——'

'Just want to walk through. I've mislaid my key somewhere.'

'Will you take the key, sir ?'

'Yes, I'll take it,' he said, 'Give it me.'

Beyond the small white house, with its edging of wired-in scarlet-yellow wallflowers, began an avenue of white chestnuts, in full fresh blossom. On either side of it deep expanses of park-land, all grass, grazed by clusters of sheep and new lambs, spread out into distances broken by islands of silver birch, an occasional clump of pines and sometimes a single gigantic lime. On the hills beyond were miles of beeches, still flaring green in the evening sun.

'I noticed you at the meeting,' he said. 'Have you come to live here ?'

'For a time. With my sister.'

'For a time ?'

'For the summer,' she said.

He wondered for a moment what there could possibly be here, in a village of thirty houses and one public-house and a shop selling nothing but stamps and the paltry rations of the brave new time, for a girl of her kind. At heart he really detested the village ; he detested the little pig-sty houses, the dreary shirts on the washing lines, the loafers by the pub-wall, the gossipers, the hat-touchers, the treachery, the southern lack of friendliness. It was nothing more than a gossip shop. And the little crust of society : the milk-



less wife of the retired naval fellow, commander or something ; the dithering lunatic doctor, surgeon or whatever he was ; and the horrible people who came to retire : dreary suburban-minded wretched people of no standing who waited for buses with lending-library books tied by little leather straps in their hands. There was a retired schoolmaster too, a real bolshevik, an out-and-outer ; and a solicitor fellow, a counsel or something, who came at week-ends and poached such fishing as there was after the herons and others had finished with the trout stocks he put in. They were all divided into factions ; they were all like horrible little weevils, feeding and boring away at everything with their trivial, insidious, killing gossip.

'Well, what do you make of our society ?' he said.

'I only came last week.'

They were coming to that part of the avenue he disliked so much. There the chestnuts ended. Concrete tank bays, half ruined huts, old army kitchens and brick ovens blackened by fire, all overgrown by thick new nettles : there was nothing else now as far as the big house, once painted so white that it could be seen, shining, from the hills ten miles away.

'Then how is it you know about the footpath ?'

'I used to come here as a little girl. My uncle lived here. My sister has his house now.'

'What was his name ?'

'Russell,' she said. 'Did you know him ?'

'No,' he said. 'I don't think so. I don't know people. Are you Miss Russell ?'

'My name is Ferguson.'

'What else ?'

'Sara,' she said.

In a gap beyond the chestnuts, where army hovels had been demolished to earth level, there was a place from which you could look down on the entire green circumference of parkland. It was so vast that it was like a kingdom of virgin grass. A few buildings, this new cow-sheds, white concrete with green roofs of an excellent new material he had discovered, could be seen on the far edge : a slightly discordant touch that summer, the great world of leaves, would presently conceal.

He stopped and, leaning on the iron fence, looked down on it. A nightingale was singing somewhere in the direction of the big empty house, but he was so absorbed by that long deep view, the sheep-

#### THE GRASS GOD

grazed kingdom, the grass coming to lushness under hot May sun that the singing, the sweetness, seemed only a secondary matter.

Making signals with his hat, he began explaining things to her : ' You see we have everything under a system. Nothing haphazard. There are five-year leys and three-year leys and one by one we plough them in and then sow again. Grass is the key——' He broke off and looked at her. ' Boring you ? I'm afraid grass is my pet thing. Sort of bible with me——'

' What are the little yellow and white numbers I see on all the gate-posts ? '

' They're the field map-numbers,' he said. ' Down at the estate office we have a map. We colour each field a different colour. We give it a number. Like that we can never go wrong——'

She turned her face : away from him, her cream soft neck tautened, making a single line from her breast to the tip of her hair as she listened.

' I think there's a nightingale singing up by the house,' she said. ' I've been listening——'

' I'm afraid I bore you with my leys and things,' he said. ' My grass.'

' Oh ! no.'

' Not really ? '

' Bore me ? ' She laughed ; he saw her eyes sparkle quickly and beautifully and once again he felt his throat run hot as she held him for another second or two with dark eyes. ' You really don't think so ? '

She laughed again over her shoulder. Then she began walking on and he let her go : purely because now he could look from behind at the long lovely legs, the graceful sliding walk.

' Is the house empty ? Don't you live here now ? '

' Yes, it's empty.'

' It used to be so beautiful.'

He strode out to catch her up. Where the front lawn of the house had been, between great Lebanon cedars, there was a forest of rising nettles. Snow had broken down the big shining magnolia from the white south wall. Hadn't there been camellias there too at one time ? He had a vague idea there had.

' You ought to live in it,' she said.

' Here ? Oh ! one can't. It's impossible. The labour alone——'

'It would be nice.'

'Oh! no. It's absolutely dog eat dog. One has servants to feed one and then servants to feed the servants and then servants still to feed—oh! no, that's dead, all that. It's gone.'

'I like this house,' she said. 'I always have liked it.'

She stood quite still, looking up. The nightingale, unmistakable now, drawing out a long needle-note, almost too exquisite, was singing in the limes beyond the stable tower. The clock on the tower, which he always kept going out of principle, showed half-past eight, and it reminded him to ask her something.

'Do you ride?' he said.

'I'm afraid I don't.'

'What a pity,' he said. 'I was going to say that you would be welcome to ride here. Any time.'

'On the sacred grass?'

She laughed and he did not know, taken slightly unaware by the flash of her tongue in her open mouth and the sprinkle of light in the brown eyes, what to say in answer.

'No: I'd rather see the house,' she said. 'Could we see it? Could we go in?'

'Tonight?'

'Oh! no. I mean sometime.'

'There really isn't anything to see,' he said. 'Things are boarded up and so on.'

'Really, it doesn't matter.'

'Oh! please,' he said. 'Of course. When would you like to go?'

'Whenever you have time,' she said. 'I'm free—quite free.'

'Tomorrow?' he said. Again, hot and sudden, he felt stabs of excitement leap up through his throat. 'Tomorrow evening?' She seemed, as he looked at her, suddenly identifiable with all the rising summer, exquisite and young, desirable as sunlight and slightly lush. 'When could you come?'

'About six?'

He nodded and then checked, in the same moment, an impulse to kiss her. He thought instead that all summer lay before him; it would be pleasant to know her all summer. Now it was only May; the leaf was hardly open on the tree.

'About six then,' he said. 'Here? I shall look forward to it very much.'

With flicks of one hand she swung the scarf; he hoped that tomorrow she would not wear the scarf.

## THE GRASS GOD

'What about the gate?' she said. 'The key?'

'Oh! of course. I forgot.'

He held the key out to her; and for a second or two she held it too, watching him with beautiful brown eyes that held him with something between gravity and the gentlest mockery.

'What shall I do with it?' she said. 'Give it up? Surrender it?'

'No,' he said. 'Keep it. For a time. Then you can let yourself in.'

'That's nice,' she said.

With high thrilling needle-notes the nightingale continued to sing in the quietness about the house as she walked away down the drive between the ruins of tank bays and army huts; the evening flowered about him with an exquisite after-light that left on the lines, the candled chestnuts, the oak-tassels, the curdling boughs of hawthorn and above all on miles of grass a tender lucid glow.

To the yellow scarf swinging away down the chestnut avenue he raised his black homberg hat for the last time, smiling as he did so. There would be all the time in the world tomorrow, he thought. The summer had hardly begun.

★       2       ★

When he got to the small converted farmhouse on the north side of the park the door was open to the warm evening and he called inside:

'You there? Anybody there?'

His wife did not answer. It was not often that she did answer. But the woman who did the cooking appeared from the kitchen in her evening apron and said:

'Good evening, sir. Mrs. Fitzgerald is out for the day, sir.'

There was never a day, he thought, when she was not out for the day.

'The day's getting old,' he said.

'Will you have dinner, sir? It can be ready when you like.'

'I'll have a drink first,' he said. 'Call me when you're ready.'

He poured himself half a tumbler of whisky and took it into the garden. Scarlet beans, budded low down with sprays of flower, were already curling far up a row of hazel sticks beyond the flower-beds. He could see a great difference in them, as in everything else, since yesterday. Swallows were flying high in the warm air

above the house, crying thinly, and on the single-storeyed wall beyond the dining-room, where there had once been only pig-sties and a filthy little copper-house for boiling potatoes one day and washing the next, the new *Gloire de Dijon* rose was already in bloom, its fat flowers like stirred cream in the evening sun.

He had converted the pig-sties into a sort of loggia and summer-house. Everything had been done very tastefully ; and now it was not possible to believe that there, where the rose flowered and where big pots of blue agapanthus lily would bloom all summer, the hideous pig-sties had ever existed or that a family of half-gipsies had lived in care-free squalor in the rest of the house. It showed what could be done.

Walking about the garden, looking at the climbing beans, the roses that had rushed into bloom in a day, the blue and orange steeples of lupins, he felt once again that summer was overflowing too fast, pouring out like a warm and delicious torrent. He felt he wanted to hold it up, to make it permanent, before all the tender and dark and fiery greenness deepened into June.

He wondered, without real thought, where his wife was. It did not matter very much ; he simply wondered. If speculation had not bored him long since he would have guessed with the doctor's wife, or with Mrs. Naval Commander, or somewhere in the sunny outposts of the local metropolis, the railway junction, playing bridge. She seemed to spend most days playing cards of some sort with the wives of local doctors, local solicitors, local sheep-breeders, local cattle auctioneers. Somewhere in that bleak society there must be someone, he often thought, who would not bore or chill or depress him but he had, so far, never discovered them. In winter he arranged excellent shooting parties ; but he and his wife had for a long time quarrelled with great unpleasantness as to whom they should invite to them. The solution could only be, as he once put it, that they should shoot each other's friends.

Part of the trouble with that simple and perhaps admirable arrangement was that he had very few friends for her to shoot. He wandered about in the garden, drinking as he walked. A breath of new perfume, from the edges of the rock path, arrested him under a big gum-stained plum tree he had left to shade the path, and underneath it he saw that already there were white pinks in bloom. He picked one of the flowers and smelled it, threading it into his button-hole. He saw too that already there were hundreds of small plums, like beautiful pale green grapes, all over the tree.



#### THE GRASS GOD

At this moment a voice called from the house :

'Dinner is ready if you are.'

He could not believe for some moments that it was not the voice of the cook who called. But with amazement he turned and saw, across the garden, that his wife had come home.

He felt at once moody and thwarted and did not answer. She stood in the small brick courtyard by the front door : wearing over her head, as always, the pale blue and white scarf with its scrawled views of Paris and tags of French quotations that he so hated.

She was thirty-nine, three years younger than himself ; but her voice, cutting across the warm luxuriance of garden, was husky, almost rough, and it seemed no longer young :

'Are you coming? Soup's on the table.'

'I'm coming,' he said.

As he walked across to the house, slowly, he knew that he did not want to eat. A whisky or two, combined with evening, was enough. He wanted, really, nothing but that : the whisky, the evening, the scent of summer. It was an arresting, enchantingly pleasant thought that for him there would be, and always was, more summer than for most people. Summer, for him, rose and blossomed from four thousand acres. There, is his special province, everything he looked at and touched and smelled, grass and bluebells and corn and chestnuts and grass again and still grass, was his own. More even than a province, perhaps : almost a kingdom. From the big empty house down to the shooting hut that the fellow had bothered him about after the meeting, in a territory so large that he was really never sure about the outer girdle of its geography, summer was not simply on the grand scale. It was his own.

In the dining-room his soup was cold. After tasting it once he got up and poured himself a second whisky and stared at his wife.

'What else is there?'

'Chops, I think.'

'You think,' he said. 'If you were here you'd know.'

She did not answer and the chop, when it came, was greasy and rather gristly ; he sawed away at it, washing it down with whisky.

'Couldn't we have pork again before the summer comes? What do we keep pigs for?'

'I gave the last of the pork away.'

'Why?'

'You tired of it. You always tire of it. There's always too much of it. I gave it away to friends——'



'Ah,' he said, 'how are the horse-stealers?'

It was an old drab dry joke of his to call her friends the horse-stealers. She looked straight beyond him, not answering. She was getting rather fat in the face, he thought. Perhaps it was because she lived awfully well and did nothing; perhaps it was simply the podginess of forty a little before its time. Whatever it was he knew that he could not endure it, now, for much longer.

'This meat is disgusting,' he said. He set down his knife and fork.

Again she did not answer. He remembered the days, before the war, before his father died, when splendid and beautiful meat had come up, after being properly hung, from their own slaughter-house. Pork and beef and lamb and pheasant and veal: whatever one wanted had always been at hand.

'Our situation's rather like the meat,' he said. 'It's bad and if we were honest we'd say we didn't want any more.'

'I've never said I didn't want any more.'

'Because you're not honest.'

'I don't think it's a question of honesty.'

'No?'

How stupid it was; how stupidly idiotic to begin an argument like that. Only a tirade, an abusing match, already developing in the air, could possibly come from it. He gripped his hands under the table and determined that, if possible, he would stifle any single abusive word. It helped if you remembered that in a house as small as this the servants heard everything, and quite calmly, in a low voice, he said:

'Could I talk to you reasonably a moment? Could you listen?'

'I'm listening.'

'Will you finish it? Will you let me get out?'

'I've already said what I have to say about it,' she said.

In the quietness he could hear, through the open door, from far across the park, a series of haunting bell-like notes of a calling cuckoo as if they were chimes of a clock striking, and he recalled, for the first time since he had sat down, the girl swinging her scarf about her long slim legs under the chestnut trees.

'I'll provide the evidence and so on, the usual thing,' he said. 'I'll do everything.'

She did not answer. He noticed she had really not combed her hair properly before coming down to table, and he could see where

it had been flattened and dishevelled by the scarf. That irritated him too ; but another thought of the girl, so tall and slender and summery, pressed the irritation away. Someone like that : someone new and unknown and fresh, he thought. He remembered how, as she waved good-bye, he had let the thought of kissing her, tomorrow, all in good time, not too soon, lie pleasantly in his mind. All his anticipation about her had seemed to tremble gently on the very edge of summer.

'There's nothing you need do,' he said, 'really. I'll provide all that's necessary—'

'Had you someone in mind?'

She had finished her chop to the last ; her mouth, rather too magenta with lipstick, shone thick and greasy as she looked up.

'No,' he said.

'I thought perhaps you might have.'

'Why?'

'It was just a thought.'

The young girl who helped in the kitchen came in, a moment later, to clear the plates away. He stared at the table and his wife said :

'You have a pink in your buttonhole. That's nice.'

'Summer has come all of a sudden,' he said.

Into this interval of polite conversation his wife pressed a new pin-prick of irritation :

'What's for afters, Margaret?'

In a soft voice the girl said that there were gooseberries and his wife repeated, as if he had not heard it and it were a circumstance of exceptional joy :

'The first gooseberries. Isn't that marvellous?'

There could be nothing marvellous about it, he thought. He detested too that south-country, half-cockney expression, so cheap in some way, by which afters signified dessert. Everything about his wife now fused into a central irritation : the scarf, the uncombed hair, the greasy mouth, and above all the way she spoke, the words she used, her jubilation concerning commonplace things.

'Custard with the gooseberries?' she said.

'I don't want either,' he said.

'As you like.'

'I want to get this thing cleared up,' he said.

He stared at her grimly, tightening his hands under the table.

'If I told you I hated you would it make any difference?' he said.

'No.'

'Would anything make any difference?'

'No.'

She was eating gooseberries bathed in yellow custard. She ate with a certain hearty lustiness, like a school-girl, and slops of yellow stuck to her magenta lipstick. She fixed him calmly with her pale grey eyes and said:

'I'm quite content with things as they are. I like the house and I have friends.'

'The horse-stealers,' he said, 'spongers.'

'Perhaps they don't like you, either.'

'They like what I have,' he said. 'That's what they like.'

He got up to take a little more whisky from the side table. As he stood drinking it, not knowing quite what to say, the girl came in from the kitchen and said:

'Excuse me, sir, there's someone to see you.'

'Who?' he said. 'Who?'

'Don't shout at the child,' his wife said.

'I am not shouting,' he said and knew that he was. He walked out of the open door into the garden, banging his glass on the table as he passed.

A figure was waiting at the small latch-gate by the summer-house and as it turned he said, loudly:

'Medhurst. What do you want?'

'I been to see Captain Fawcett, sir.'

'I'm having my dinner. Why the hell have I to be dragged out to listen about Fawcett?'

'Captain Fawcett says he spoke to you about this cottage seven or eight times, sir.'

'I don't recall it.'

'Everybody knows you're rather forgetful, sir, and I daresay you forgot it.'

'Forgetful? Forgetful?'

'You're away a lot too, sir. You're away and you don't know what goes on.'

'What does go on? Tell me.'

'Well, sir,' Medhurst said. 'Well——'

'Well what?'

'There's a lot said, sir. There's a lot of feeling.'

## THE GRASS GOD

'For Christ's sake about what?'

'One thing and another,' Medhurst said. 'One thing and another.'

He felt his heart raging inside him at the thought of the accumulating evil pettiness about him, at the vague insinuations of disloyalty and dislocation. There was no doubt that here and there the damn bolsheviks were working their way in. It was not like the old days, when one had loyalty and trust and decency and continuity of service. Now there were always labour troubles, dissatisfaction, some feeling of unspecified unrest. He was about so say something about this when Medhurst said :

'I don't want to keep you from your dinner, sir. But I'd like to ask you something.'

'What?'

'Will you come and have a look at this hut tomorrow? I don't think you've ever been down——'

'Yes,' he said. 'I'll come.'

'All right, sir. You come down.' He opened the gate, went through it and stood the other side of it. 'About six? I'll be home from work and had a wash by then.'

'All right,' he said. 'I'll be down.'

It was only when Medhurst was twenty or thirty yards down the road that he remembered that, after all, he could not go at that time. He remembered his delicious feeling of anticipation about the girl in the yellow scarf; and how, tomorrow, they were going to explore the house together.

Then as he got back to the house he heard the sound of a car being driven away. Harshly the gears clashed up the quiet road, and he knew that, all too soon, before he could speak again, his wife had gone. It was almost dark and he was alone now with the whisky, the scented garden and the big empty space of the park, all grass, beyond.

His wife's name was Cordelia: and somehow he had never quite come round to that, either.

★      3      ★

Every morning in spring and summer he was up by seven o'clock in order to make, sometimes in a jeep, sometimes a small dog-cart, a tour of the estate. It was wonderfully pleasant, often a tonic of exhilaration for him after a bad evening with Cordelia and the whisky, to drive into deep woodland roads, under high banks of

primrose and bluebell and bracken, through plantations of birch and sweet-chestnut, in and about the little valley. There he had almost everything ; on those four thousand acres there were endless variations. Hop-gardens on the south-west slopes, from which on fine days you could see the line of sea, flanked old and excellent cherry-orchards and tasselled plantations of hazel-nut. In copses about the park rhododendrons had been planted for game-cover and from under startling magenta fires of flower cock-pheasants would come serenely stalking, themselves on fire with flames of brilliant scarlet and green and blue. On the lake water-lilies, both yellow and white, grew in thousands and wild duck inhabited the small upper islands of sallow. Where the cherry-orchards finished their snowy blossoming there were many acres of pink apple and then, in high summer, the great fragrance of limes about the park. The largeness and width of it embraced everything, from prize cattle to a white peacock or two that still roamed about the old wild lawns behind the big house, among the rose-pink camellias he had forgotten.

It had not always been so large. At the time of his father's death there had been not more than two thousand acres. They were the slump days. His father had been rather a mean but in many ways admirable landowner, conservative and human, liked and feared, of the old nineteenth-century school. Everything had been cautiously solid, thorough, unscientific perhaps, but profitable. Labour had been cheap ; men were two a penny. Twelve gardeners, with a number of apprentice boys, had raised delicious things in the old walled gardens and hot-houses sheltered from cold winds by Atlantic cedars. Peaches and asparagus were always ready to perfection before their time ; there were always amaryllis and gardenias and carnations and orchids for the house.

A loveliness flourished, unhurried and quiet and prodigal, that had never come back and now never would.

His father could not have died, in a sense, at a better time. The slump was grim and stubborn ; estates everywhere were breaking up. His father had been a man who believed in eating his apples only from the trees he had. Solid entrenchment, capital sagaciously invested, had built up an estate that was like a bastion. If times were bad you did not venture out beyond it ; if they were good you still remained at home. That was what prudence and capital and sound sense and foresight gave as their reward : an



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antidote of comfort against evil days, another spread of butter for the good.

His father, in consequence, had never bought land. Expansion, like spraying fruit trees, was not in his philosophy. But after he had gone it was different. All about the edges of the estate were pieces of land, either other estates or little farms, that the slump had beaten into decay and that were ripe for selling. And so another fifty or a hundred acres were added here ; a hop-garden or an orchard there ; a number of useful little farms, many pieces of woodland and another mile of stream. Where other people were shedding land against the evil of the times, the slump and the threat of war, the son acquired it. And he went on acquiring it, cheaply, thoughtfully and as it turned out wisely, until the beginning of the war.

As a landowner, a farmer, though young, he did not go to the war. It was after all not necessary; a modern army did not merely fight on its stomach ; at least six, and later ten or more persons were needed to keep a single soldier in the field or a pilot in the sky. Not everybody was needed for fighting. So he had stayed at home, in the country, raising food that everyone needed, putting the plough firmly back into soil that had never seen a share for centuries, unlocking richness.

About that time too he had closed the house in the park. He had never liked that dog-eat-dog existence, with servants feeding on servants, butlers lording it over underlings, pocketing the perquisites of the pantry, and he had never really cared for hot-house flowers. Orchids and gardenias and poinsettias, all so un-English and precious and unreal, were symbols of a world he found he could give up without a flicker of regret. Soil and grass, things of depth and substance and reality, replaced them ; and gradually he had brought to them, to grass especially, a scientific interest that was more than a theoretical passion. It became a creed.

As he drove in the jeep through the park on the following evening he decided to make a detour to the south side, to where, on a two-acre strip, he conducted trials on thirty or forty kinds of grass and clover variations. Soils deficient in nitrates, in limes, in potash, or whatever it was, were marked off in oblongs, to be given their trials of grass in endless permutations.

He stayed for a short time looking with pleasure and pride at the patterns of delicate and brightening green. It had been another beautiful day ; there was a warm trembling everywhere of



rising grass and leaf and flower. Flies were dancing and you could feel in the air, in the blackbird throatiness, the cuckoo mockery, the whole deepening pulse of summer.

Then as he drove the jeep back across the park, already quite dry and hard from the heat of sun and yellow now in brilliant varnished stretches of buttercups, he saw a man in shirt-sleeves working out on the grass. He remembered then his plan of soil-testing the entire estate. That gigantic task, to be recorded in time on a great coloured map that would hang in a special section of the estate office, was something he supposed not one farm in a thousand, in England at any rate, had ever done. In America of course they did this sort of thing; America was soil-plotted. They were ahead of us there.

He stopped the jeep and walked across to talk to the man who, with an implement like a large auger, was making trial borings into turf.

'Hullo, Pritchard,' he said. 'How does it go?'

'Good evening, sir.' The man, quite young, in his shirt-sleeves, was sweating heavily. 'Warm. See that?' He held up the auger, with its spiral of pale brown soil, crumbling away hairy rooted earth with his fingers. 'Dry. As if there'd never been any rain. Ever.'

'Extraordinary.' The dry rainless spiral of earth crumbled like dusty brown cake, sprinkling the tall buttercups. 'How is it here? What have you got?'

'Sandgate beds. Not too good. You've got signs of spring water at twenty-two inches nearly everywhere. I'll let you see.'

Pritchard screwed the auger down into earth, and then with a swift jerk wrenched it up again.

'See the little rusty patches? like veins?' He thumbed away iron-coloured crumbs of soil. 'That's your water.'

'Bad?'

'Typical. Water everywhere.'

Fitzgerald knew that it meant more drainage schemes. They were very expensive; but he knew too that they had to be done and that he would come to them gradually too, all in good time.

'I'm glad you're having this done, sir.'

'Yes,' he said.

'It seems amazing when you come to think of it that we walk about on land and haven't the slightest idea what goes on underneath it.'

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'Yes?'

'I mean, for example, the water. You'd say the land here was bone dry. Never a drop of moisture in it. Yet there it is—water everywhere, all the way down water seeping through.'

'Amazing,' he said.

Presently he said good-bye and got into the jeep and drove up through the buttercups to the house. It was striking six when he parked the jeep by the blackened and ruined army huts. A soft yellow bloom of buttercups had been beaten up and lay softly on the wheel-hubs, and by the army ruins crowds of white nettles were in flower.

Down the avenue he could not see the girl.

A curious feeling of disappointment suddenly gnawed at him as he stood there waiting. He had thought of the whole affair, the previous day, as something deliciously casual, almost offhand. He had not even wanted her, as he often wanted other women, out of loneliness, or in pleasure-spite against Cordelia, who would neither go nor let him go.

But now, as he walked up and down by the ruins and the nettles, he hated the idea that, after all, the girl was not coming: that she was going to let him down. It was not simply that he was used to people doing the things he wanted. It was something else; it was something not expected, an annoyingly elusive development he could not define.

Then suddenly he heard her call. He turned and, in a startling moment of surprise and pleasure and irritation, saw her coming from behind the big cedars at the side of the house. His irritation arose from the fact that she was once again wearing the same yellow scarf: this time tied over her head.

Even that irritation melted as he watched the long slender legs swinging through the grass. Today he was not wearing his hat and he simply lifted his hand to greet her. She waved her hand too and he saw that she carried in it a spray or two of rose-pink flowers.

'Camellias,' she said. 'I found the trees.'

'For a moment I thought you were not coming.'

'I wanted to get here first. I wanted to see it in any case, whether you came or not.'

'Did you think I wouldn't come?'

She seemed to consider this question for a moment. Half smiling, dark eyes again like elongated buds above the shell-like rosettes, so pure and waxen, of the camellia flowers, she said:

'No : I knew you'd come.'

Together, then, they began to walk up to the house.

'Where did you find the camellias? It's late for them.'

'At the back,' she said. 'Don't you know? You mean to say this is your house and yet—'

'I always fancied they grew this side, on the wall.'

'Curious man,' she said. 'Don't you think they're beautiful?'

He said yes, he thought they were beautiful. It had been many years since he had seen them or even since he had been into the house ; and as he drew out his great bunch of keys and started to unlock the front door he said :

'I warn you it's an absolute shambles. There's nothing here.'

A moment or two later, as he pushed open the big white door, it was possible to see how true that was.

He stood inside the big hall-way with the girl, looking up at the stairs. They were elegant and wide and had once been white. Pictures had hung on the high walls. He remembered, as he looked at the dark unfaded rectangles left by them, that they had been very solid and sombrely ancestral. They had given tone. But now all pictures, all tone and even half the stair balustrade had gone. An army had, in the army way, availed itself of several stair-rails, an odd window ledge, the shelves that had once held tea-services on either side of the fireplace. It had left blackening boot marks like dark repeated bruises all the way up the naked stairs.

'You see,' he said.

He half turned away as if to go out again.

'What's in here?' she said.

'It was the drawing-room,' he said. Now it was marked 'Company Commander : Keep out.'

Blinds with yellow silken tassels were drawn at the windows. By the side of the fireplace a few notices in typescript were still pinned, daily routine orders or things of that sort, and one or two sheets had fallen into the hearth, where showers of soot, pocked with rain, had covered them.

'You see, it's all gone,' he said. 'I told you.'

'Upstairs,' she said. 'What's up there?'

He knew that it could only be the same upstairs. Walking carefully, trying the bare blackened treads as he climbed, he led the way upstairs. A smell, dusty, sun-dried, greasily and stalely old, met him everywhere. No colour, even where the wallpaper

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of the main landing had once been a broad pattern of silver and chicory, remained now. Dust and time and the army locusts had eaten it away.

The effect of her walking into this, fresh and lovely, the spray of pink camellias in her hands, was startling to him as he turned and looked back down the stairs. Once more a leap of excitement, accompanied by the slightest wave of impatience, went through him as he watched her.

She looked up. What he felt was evidently clear in his face and she said :

'Something wrong?'

'No,' he said. 'Nothing wrong.'

It was useless, he thought, going through the whole business, quite pointless and silly, walking along empty dust-grey floors, from the derelict desert of one room to another. There was nothing to be got from it and his feeling of impatience grew. However much he wanted to kiss her he could not kiss her there among the ghost-ruins, on the broken stairs, in the sun-stale dustiness of a dead world.

He was glad when, on the second storey, they reached the far side of the house, where smaller rooms, one from a central balcony, looked out over what had once been the garden below. He had completely forgotten the geography of that floor, once the servants' quarters, until suddenly she opened a door and cried out :

'But there's furniture in here. A bed and things—'

'Odd,' he said. 'It can't be. Good Lord!'

A single divan bed, with a bentwood chair, a kitchen table and a little strip of carpet furnished the room that opened through French windows on to an iron-railed balcony. He stood for a moment in the doorway, puzzled by it all, and then he remembered.

Here, in blitz days, fire-watchers had brewed tea and kept a look out for the enemy and slept. From the little balcony they had been able to see all across the gardens, to the deserted hot-houses, and along the valley. He remembered it all : the ladder out on to the roof, the rows of fire-buckets, the shovels, the sand-bags and the sand. Queer how one forgot these things. He had even had his own estate fire-engine, with seven or eight trained men and organised practices and a decent run of hose. It had been rather fun.

He opened the French windows. For some moments he stood half in and half out of the room, looking at the wilderness of cedars

and nettle, lilac and thistle below. The room had a western aspect and now warm sun poured in, heavy with scent from many old sweet lilac trees.

Turning to explain about the room, its bed and its firewatchers, he found the girl just behind him, looking across the valley. Once more the scarf roused in him a sharp sense of excited annoyance, and once more she caught the swift look of it in his face.

'What is it——?'

'Just the scarf,' he said.

'Don't you like it?'

'I hate it.'

He took the scarf between his fingers and began to untie it. She shook her dark hair free as he pulled the scarf away and threw it on to the little bed. A half-smile on her face parted her lips very slightly, as if she were going to say something, and her long body was pressed against him, close and supple, as he kissed her.

'Did you bring me here to do that?' she said.

'You wanted to come here.'

'Was I the only one?' She smiled, holding her lips up to him a second time. He wanted to take her quickly, in a sudden rush of over-exquisite feeling, but she said softly: 'Careful of the camellias. They're too lovely to spoil. Let me put them on the bed.'

She laid the camellia spray on the bed, beside the scarf, with gentle and almost ironic care.

'There,' she said. 'Now my hands are free.'

Smiling again, she let the outward gestures of her hands fall away. It gave an impression of slight mockery to her whole body as she leaned back against the side of the open window, eyes half-closed. The sun on her eyes turned them once again to the shape of long half-open buds; and when her mouth opened slightly, quivering with what he felt might have been either excitement or amusement, he bent to kiss her again.

There was a curious mixture of emotion behind that second kiss, or perhaps lack of it, that baffled him. She seemed one moment to stand there, arms open, free, ready to offer herself like something on a plate; and then the next moment she was gone, withdrawn, cool and charming, beautiful but shut away.

'Queer how you found this room,' she said.

'Oh! no—I had no idea——'

'It's lovely. I like it. No garden, no gardeners, nobody here——'



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'It was used during the war by fire-watchers.' He began to explain it with seriousness. She smiled again and out in the garden he thought he heard the first clipped charring notes of a nightingale. He saw her listening too; and when she broke away to lean against the iron railing of the little balcony he let her stay there for a moment or two alone, looking at the shape of her body as it curved forward, the legs long and firm, the thighs a little heavier and rounder in shape than he had thought them to be, sleekly pressing against the silky material of her dress. He could not resist the notion of touching her there, where the full roundness filled out the skirt; and it occurred to him once again how pleasant the growing summer was, how pleasant it could be there with her, in light, exquisite and not too serious moments like this: quite alone, quite exquisite, quite without responsibility.

The nightingale, breaking away from the first short charring notes, began to sing with high sustained flutings of clear ecstasy and the girl said: 'There she goes again.' All this time she did not seem to be paying any attention at all to the regular gentle caressing of his hand across her body. The strange tangled wilderness of great trees and nettles, billowing hedges of lilac, blackberries strangling catalpa-trees, elderberry swarming over beds of dying rose, seemed to fascinate her instead into a long oblivious stare.

Suddenly she said: 'We're not alone after all. There's somebody walking about behind the cedar trees.'

'Where?'

'You can hear it,' she said.

The evening was so still, quite without wind even up there at the top of the house, that he could hear the shuffle of dry footsteps exactly as she said, among dead leaves and grass behind the cedar trees.

'No one comes up here,' he said. 'The gates are locked.'

'There's someone. A child or something. You can see them now.'

A ghost-like trail of something white, behind the low black cedar branches, became one with the dry shufflings of feet among grass and leaves.

'It's a peacock,' she said. 'A white one.'

'I thought they'd been taken away—'

She leaned forward to watch. Delicate and snow-white and finicky, the white peacock trailed slowly away, half-hidden, a



ghost-bird in the grass ; and as she leaned forward he let his hand curve upwards round her body. But once again she seemed as if she did not notice it ; or as if it did not interest her.

'Peacocks and camellias and rooms in the tops of houses,' she said. 'Do you know what you *have* got?'

'One can't live on peacocks and camellias and things,' he said. 'I'm a farmer. A business man, a landowner.'

'This lovely house,' she said.

'Oh ! lovely,' he said. 'Wonderful. Forty servants and a hundred tons of coal every winter——'

'I like it,' she said. 'There's something about it.'

'Would you like to come again?' he said. He moved his hand, touching and turning her body so that it moved upward and round to him. 'Often?'

'Often.'

In that moment, as he prepared to kiss her again, she turned suddenly and drew him into the room.

'Not there,' she said. 'I don't trust anyone. Not even the peacock. And anyway I must go.'

'Please.'

'I must go.'

'I had a call to make on one of my men and I was going to ask you if you'd come along——'

'Tomorrow,' she said.

'All right,' he said. 'Shall we meet here tomorrow and then go——'

'No. Let's go first, wherever it is, and then come back here.'

He kissed her again ; and there, by the bed, with the sun coming in a long warm shaft through the open window, he received in return the same restrained, cool, withdrawn and yet half exquisite sort of kiss that had baffled him before. In the garden the nightingale was charring and whistling on high notes. The white peacock, like a bird sleep-walking, rustled with dry, almost harsh echoes through dead leaves and grass. The girl picked up her scarf and the spray of camellias from the bed. And as he moved to kiss her for the last time he touched by accident, for a second, the too delicate waxy flowers ; and the rosette of petals, breaking like round pink wafers, fell to pieces.

'Careless man,' she said.

He could not help feeling that there was far too much fuss, the following evening, about the water-supply for Medhurst.

Twice, as the girl sat waiting in the jeep under the narrow arch of hazels that spanned the stone track leading through gated copses to the old wood-frame shooting hut, he stepped out the distance from the back-door of the house to the well about which there had been so much complaining. It was not more than fifty yards.

'You said the thing was a hundred yards away,' he said.

'You git a morning with a foot of snow,' Medhurst said, 'and it seems like half a mile.'

'It seems, it seems,' he said. 'But the fact is it's fifty yards.'

Medhurst, dark and glowering, in his shirt-sleeves, stood watching Fitzgerald pace the field. His wife, a sort of half gypsy creature, Fitzgerald thought, with scrawny black hair and a black blouse pinned across her hollow chest with a safety pin, stood at the back door nursing a greasy-nosed child of eighteen months naked except for a rag of overall.

'Well, let's leave the question of how far the water is,' Fitzgerald said. 'What about the water? Is it good?'

'It's quite good, sir.'

'You've no complaints about the water?'

'No, sir.'

He stood looking at the shooting-hut. Perhaps, sometimes, under pressure of events, of business, of time itself, he was rather forgetful; he granted that. But now he clearly remembered the hut. As a boy he had come with his father on shooting parties there. It was a convenient half-way house on the perimeter of the estate as it then was. He remembered the little hut crowded with shooters; the smell of good tobacco, the sharp rich reek of whisky, the aroma of fatty delicious hams fresh from under starchy napkins in shooting baskets. He remembered the beaters with plates of good beef and glasses of golden beer standing about on autumn mornings under the yellowing boughs of hazel and hornbeam; the clack of voices in the wintry woodland air.

It had been very pleasant in those days; the shoots were not the same now.

'Well,' he said, 'what about the house?'

'Well, there it is, sir. You see—for yourself.'

Of course he saw. It was an oblong asbestos-and-frame affair with a brick porch and chimney and square sash-windows. A tiled roof, once red but now a pleasant shade of ochre-green from a heavy growth of lichen, sat on the place like a crumpled and sagging hat. Paths of coal ashes led about a garden of gaunt cabbage stalks, undug as yet after winter, and a line of grey washing hung by the wood-shed.

'How many rooms have you got?' he said.

'One,' Medhurst said. 'You see there's one big room.'

'Is that all?'

He supposed there never had been more than that one large room; he supposed too that there ought to have been some sort of conversion of the interior, but he could not remember. His only memory of it was something extraordinarily aromatic and pleasant and snug.

'You like to have a look inside for yourself, sir?'

'If that's convenient.'

'I'd like you to have a look, sir.'

At the door, as he followed Medhurst, the wife stood apart, dangling the greasy snuffling child in the air so that he caught a glimpse of naked limbs, unwashed as it seemed for weeks. Her face too, young but colourless, was ditched in its neck wrinkles by earth-dark grime. Her shoes were tied with string; and she stared dully, half vacant, as he removed his hat before going through the door.

Inside, rather as he thought, it was not precisely as Medhurst said. A kitchen with sink and oil-stove, from which led off a small scullery with copper, made in the first place two rooms. Then there was a third, divided in turn into three by screens of plywood that did not reach to ceiling height: making a sitting-room with two bedrooms beyond.

'I thought you said there was one room,' he said.

'Well, rightly it's one, sir.'

'I don't get that. By my computation it's five.'

'By rights it's one, sir. It always was one and it's no different—'

'Well, one or five—'

He looked about him, depressed, angry, resentful that his snug recollection, aromatic with hams and whisky and tobacco, had been so vilely extinguished by the frowsy filth, the uncleared table, the couch piled with bed-junk, the floor littered with a wreckage of

gum-boots and sacks and an occasional battered toy. Icily, yet raging inside, he said :

‘What are your complaints about the place?’

‘Well, first there’s the water——’

‘You said you had no complaint about the water.’

The woman, still dangling the child, came and stood staring in, with open mouth, at the door :

‘We gotta sleep in two rooms, we gotta sleep in two rooms——’

‘The three of you?’

‘No, sir : six,’ Medhurst said. ‘You see we got two more boys and a girl, sir. They’re growing up. That’s the trouble.’

Fixed by the dark and groping stare of the woman Fitzgerald was shaken by a short repugnant wave of sickness. He was repulsively amazed by the thought of physical contact. Sleep, children, the exquisite nature of women and love : he could not grasp that here, among the dark fibres of this revolting and infuriating existence, these things had ever had the remotest reality.

‘We gotta sleep in two rooms, we gotta sleep in two rooms——’

‘What are you making now, Medhurst?’ he said.

‘Just under the five, sir.’

‘You get the allowances?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s another fifteen, isn’t it?’ he said. He was not waiting for an answer. ‘Your wife—surely she makes a little? Hopping and pea-picking and that sort of thing? And the boys? They make something?’

‘Yes, sir.’

His final revulsion spat itself out :

‘Then what in Heaven’s name are you cribbing about?’

While Medhurst stood flushed and speechless, the wife began to whine by the door : ‘We gotta sleep in two rooms——’

‘First you pretend it’s one room. Then it’s two. In point of fact it’s five.’

‘I suppose it is, sir.’

‘Of course it is. You twist it to make one. Just as you twist the water. What do you want me to do?’ He was trying to make for the doorway, almost shouting. ‘Look at it. Look at it for yourself. It used to be a charming, civilised little place—it used to be tolerably decent!——’

His own words seemed to eject him past the unwashed woman and the snuffling child, through the unwashed kitchen. Behind

him he heard the grouching mutter of Medhurst's voice throwing a broken word or two of final complaint at him down the coal-ash path. In his rage an awareness of another exquisite evening, all gold-floating light, lovely with oak-flower and tenderly drowsy with bluebell scent from below crowded hazels, was almost too much to bear.

It occurred to him then, as he walked back to the jeep, that he had been longer than he thought. The girl was no longer waiting. For a second or two he stood in the narrow lane, his rage slowly declining and leaving in its place the queer haunted sense of gnawing disappointment he had experienced the previous evening: the distant, not wholly tangible fear that somehow, in an odd casual moment, when she chose, she would let him down.

He was relieved and glad to see her coming along the woodland path under the hazels.

'I thought I'd lost you,' he said.

'Again?' She smiled. 'A flower for you.' She stood close to him, so that her body almost touched him, threading a pink-white bottle-brush flower into his button-hole. 'An orchid.'

His dislike of those other orchids, the exotic purple leopard mouths his father had been so fond of growing, crossed his mind; but he forgot it immediately.

'We are being watched,' she said.

She was being expressly gentle and careful, almost deliberately finicky, with the flower.

'The people from the house,' she said. 'Now the stories will begin.'

From the corner of his eye he saw Medhurst, the woman and the bare-buttocked child against a background of gaunt cabbage-stalks, ash-paths and grey washing by the wood-shed.

'Stories?'

'I am threading a flower into your button-hole. I am riding in a jeep with you. What more do they want?'

His revulsion at the foetid depravity of the little house came rushing back. Hatred, both for the malignant shattering of recollections pleasantly stored from childhood and for the mere existence of the three unwashed people now staring at him, darkened his mind.

'They're the people who govern us,' he said. 'They're the power now. Look at them. The masters.'

Only a little later, struck once again by the beauty of the evening



#### THE GRASS GOD

—the track curled upward through old orchards of late apple still in deep pink blossom—he calmed down. He almost forgot it all. The scent of apple-blossom was so soothing and sweet in his nostrils that he began to drive more slowly, with one hand : the other on her knee.

‘What about the stories they’ll tell of you?’ he said. ‘Don’t you care?’

‘I’m only here for the summer.’

‘Long enough for the horse-stealers and mongrels,’ he said. It was unlikely she would understand that expression ; but he did not explain it. ‘Shall we go up to the house?’

‘I love it there.’

A final mutter of his discord came back :

‘They tell nothing but lies, these people. They whine and lie and touch their caps and all the time they hate you.’ And then : ‘Oh ! I’m sorry. Awfully boring for you. It really isn’t important. Let them live in their cesspool. They made it. It doesn’t matter.’

She smiled and said simply.

‘Are you supposed to caress my knee or break it in half?’

He laughed and put both hands on the wheel. He had not realised how physical, how tautened, his feelings were.

‘I’m supposed to be caressing you.’ A rush of excitement pricked up through his throat. He spoke softly : ‘All of you. Is it possible?’

‘We’ll see,’ she said.

In the house, in the westward sun, still warm enough to give her body exactly the smooth soft heat of a bird’s-egg, they lay for a long time on the little bed. Wood-pigeons, taking up from each other chains of unfinished notes, cooed drowsily from the cedar trees. A butterfly, sulphur yellow, floated leaf-like about the balcony.

During some part of this time he could not help thinking of Cordelia. This, perhaps, was the first, the perfect opportunity to break Cordelia’s bridge-playing, impervious heart. Even Cordelia, perhaps, would not be able to bear, without some sort of action, love on the doorstep. Perhaps it was after all an excellent thing that Medhurst and his slut had seen the little ceremony of threading the orchid into his button-hole : perhaps not a bad thing after all that in two days, even less, everyone would know of it, Cordelia included. Fitzgerald with a lady-friend in the village : even Cordelia, perhaps, would find it hard to put up with that. So out



of it he would have loveliness and fun and then, by the summer's end, finish Cordelia too.

'I still can't understand why you don't open this house. It's so beautiful——'

'Economic impossibility.'

'What words. If it were mine I'd open it and damn the economics. Make the gardens nice again. Live in a little part of it——'

'And what are you doing now?'

She smiled, turning her body, her mouth swift in its teasing flicker:

'Loving in a little part of it.'

Her legs, long and golden-naked on the grey fire-watching blanket, were fuller and more lovely than he had, only the previous evening, imagined they would be. He touched them softly with his hands. He felt instantly a sharp quiver of response, fiery, almost painful, run up through her body and end in a convulsive hungry flick of her mouth against his own.

'Be careful how you do that,' she warned him. It was still with a little smile. 'You may be sorry——'

'Didn't I start it?' he said. 'Didn't I let you in with the key?'

'I've still got the key. But just be careful how you do that to me——'

In a long almost drowsy movement she stretched herself full length on the bed.

'What are you thinking of?' she said.

'Nothing——'

'Admiring me?'

'You're so lovely——'

'Nice man,' she said.

Outside, beyond the sun-bathed balcony, he could hear summer growing in the evening voices of drooning pigeons and in the throaty sweetness of several blackbirds in woods along the river. Bees were still working, perhaps on a tree of roses, just beyond the window, on the house wall. He could feel all summer growing and deepening in those sounds. He could feel it in the turn of her body, in the flame of butterfly wings darting yellow across the sun. He could even feel it in a curious softening and mounting ache in his own limbs. It was mounting and deepening and richening everywhere, rapidly and luxuriantly, with his own miles and miles of grass.

## THE GRASS GOD

'I've a feeling the summer is going to be wonderful,' he said.  
'Wonderful fun.'

'I think so too,' she said.

★ 5 ★

It did not strike him as curious, afterwards, whenever they met in the small room at the top of the empty-house, sun-drenched and stifling as summer settled into weeks of heat, that she did not mention love.

It was certainly, people were saying, the most wonderful summer for years. This, they said, was what you called a summer. You knew, with such a summer, where you were. Day unfolded after day, hot and tranquil, settled under blue soft skies, into distances shortened and trembling under heat haze. In the garden a rapid luxuriance of nettle and thistle and yellow ragwort sprang up, with thickets of wild rose and frothy elder, to choke what had once been paths and beds and lawns between the crumbling walls. On the house the snow-broken magnolia lifted immense copper-green leaves centrally filled by buds of solid waxy ivory. A pale bluish fire sprang from the tips of cedar branches. Across the park the great limes were early in flower and down across the meadows the hay was early too.

The girl did not speak of love ; and perhaps, if he had noticed it, he would not have thought it extraordinary, since he did not speak of it either. But occasionally, as he waited for her in the wilderness of weeds and briar at the back of the house, and she was a little late, merely perhaps ten minutes or so, he experienced once again an uneasy stab of disappointment, a curious scratching edge of doubt that she would let him down. But that too did not trouble him again once she arrived.

All summer, continually, she spoke instead about the house. She would lie dreamily on the bed and reproach him in the gentlest terms about its emptiness. She would apply to it the word she never applied to him and which he, in turn, was not for some long time to apply to her.

'Oh ! I love this house. I love it. I can't understand——'  
She did not tire, all summer, of the fabrication of that one particular dream : of how she would open the house, burn the briars, see the lawns once again smooth and short, the peacock trailing across fresh bright grass, the roses tied to the house-wall, the camellias

given light and care. 'If you only opened it for the summer. A little of it. A room or two——'

'But good God,' he would say. 'It would cost a mint. Twenty or thirty thousand pounds.'

'Would it ruin you?'

'My dear child, I'm a business man.'

'Would it ruin you? Why do you want money?'

That, he told himself, was a question people often asked when they had none themselves. It always bored him to try to answer it.

'How much do you suppose you have?' she said. 'Altogether?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'Marvellous man,' she said. Her teasing had behind it, sometimes, a touch of shrewdness: exact rather than hard. 'First he doesn't know he has camellias in his garden. Then it's peacocks. Now it's money.'

'Well, I won't say I couldn't guess——'

'All right: guess,' she said.

'My father left a quarter of a million,' he said. 'I suppose if you count the farm and the stock and the house and the hop-business and so on there's probably the same again. Perhaps more.'

'It doesn't mean anything,' she said.

'No?'

His turn to be a little teasing now, he thought. Strange how people took that attitude; curious how they could feel that money, in great lumps, became negative.

Or was she probing? he thought. Trying to size the chances up? That, ten years ago, was what Cordelia had done. In his stupidity he had not seen it and now her teeth were in and he could not get them out.

Unexpectedly she said:

'It doesn't mean anything to me, I mean. What can you do with it every night? Look at it? You can't even count it.'

'Like a good old-fashioned miser,' he said. 'No. But I have it to look at. In things. In the land. In the grass.'

She smiled. It was already full summer, almost the middle of July, and the last of the hay, drying sweetly along the meadows, filled the air as it blew in through the balcony window with its delicious sun-ripe breath. Was there anything more wonderful than that?

THE GRASS GOD

'You and your grass,' she said. 'A grass 'god—that's what you are.'

'I've got fifteen hundred acres of it. That's true.'

'You've got everything.'

No : not everything, he thought. Not quite. He was struck by thoughts of Cordelia : ever-present, the leech, the blood-sucker who would not let go.

'Some things you can't buy,' he said.

'Oh ! nonsense. You can buy anything. You know perfectly well.'

'Not the things Cordelia won't give.'

'Oh ! damn Cordelia,' she said. 'Damn wives. Don't bore me with wives.'

'Wives are never so important as when they bore you——'

She sighed, stretched her body on the bed, giving a voluptuous twist of her long full legs, pressing herself down into it with the softness of a bird settling down on a nest.

'I don't want to be a wife,' she said. 'I'm free. I'm something you can have for nothing : for the fun of it——'

Something about the way she said this, casual and clipped and thrown away, went through his body like flame. In a flash, briefly extinguished, like a stab of heart-burn, it jolted him : steely and brutally sudden and withdrawn, leaving in its place a painful emptiness.

At the time he did not understand it. He was simply shaken by its unexpectedness. Almost immediately he felt he wanted to take her and hold her simply and quietly there where she lay. He pressed his mouth against her face. Out in the garden and beyond it there was hardly a sound of summer. The land had been drugged, almost stunned, by a week of continuous heat ; the nightingales had finished singing and with them the cuckoos and almost every other bird except a few monotonous piping yellow hammers chipping away in the stifling heat of hay-filled afternoons. It was such wonderful weather, people said, marvellous weather indeed, perfect : magnificent for things like garden parties and games and flower shows. You felt so safe ; you could plan things, as you so rarely could in England, weeks and weeks ahead.

She had been lying in the sun a good deal all summer, mostly half out on the balcony of the room, so that now her body had taken on something of the colour of tawny-golden hay. They had come to an arrangement by which she had the key of the house too. In that way she could let herself in and wait for him.

And each time he wondered, as he climbed up through the deserted airless house, with its spidery sun-woven shabbiness, its army blisters and its scars of decay, whether she would be there : whether by some chance she would let him down.

But each time she was there ; she did not let him down. Each time he climbed the stairs with a heart beating a little faster but without a conscious touch of anxiety. It was just something, the very faintest wonder, hardly even a doubt, as to whether she would be there, whether she would fail.

Earlier in the summer he had had the happy thought, one evening, of bringing up a picnic basket of drinks, a few bottles of champagne, and a box of biscuits. He was late coming down from town sometimes : business, a board meeting, an irritating slow-motion session with one of his men, who could not explain in twenty minutes what he himself could have explained in three, a session with Fawcett about estate matters, a train not on time. And on these occasions he had his doubts in reverse : not that she would not have arrived, but that she would have been, grown bored and have gone.

But that too never happened. She was always quite happy to lie there waiting : the champagne ready in one of the old fire-buckets but never opened ; reading or asleep or half-asleep, her body growing deeper brown, a pure corn-colour, as July turned to August and the splendid dry heat carried on into September.

What was it she had called him ? A grass god ? Well, in a way it was true. In a way perhaps that explained him. But it was she, really, who was much more like a goddess. She was like the composite figure of all the long summer. She had been just so perfect and delicious, so changeless and dependable, and always so beautiful, ever since that lovely evening he had first met her when the oaks were breaking into flower and the nightingales were in song above the bluebells and both of them had agreed, quite truthfully as it turned out, that the summer would be fun.

But suddenly, for him, the summer was not fun.

★ 6 ★

He came home on a hot September afternoon from a day in London and drove round the estate, as he often did, before going home. It was so hot that he stopped and took off his city coat and hat as he drove the car across the park and through the lanes. September had come in with a lovely spell of high tranquil skies,



blue and hot as July : so that everywhere people were saying that they could not remember such a summer. There were others who said it reminded them of another summer, when all the ponds had dried, or another summer, when there were corn-fires everywhere, or still another year when, even in England, cattle had to be killed for want of water. It seemed, they said, as if it would never end.

On the higher farms, where land was inclined to sandiness and there were stretches of pine-heath and bracken with birch-trees, he saw water-carts at work across the fields that day. The pine-heath developed, lower down, into a stretch of common land, rippled purple now with heather. The soil was a good six-foot depth of peat there. He had never been able to do anything with it ; and that afternoon he saw that it was on fire.

As he stopped the car and got out to stand and look at it one of his men came along the road, riding a bicycle. He stopped too and touched his cap.

'The peat's alight again, sir,' he said.

'Yes.'

'That'll burn like that for weeks, sir. No putting it out.'

'No.'

'I recollect '21, sir. It burned then. It burned half the summer. The fire keeps running underground.'

'That's the trouble,' he said.

'That is, sir. You think you got it out but you never have. It's always there. Burning down where you can't see it.'

He did not answer this time. Together he and his man watched for a moment or two longer the smoke trailing slowly across purple-brown islands of bracken and heather, blackened by veins of creeping flameless fire ; and then the man got on his bicycle and rode away, calling back :

'That's goin' to be pretty serious soon, sir, if we don't get no rain.'

Presently, when he drove on, he found that it was really too hot, after a longish day in the city, to drive very far, and he turned the car for home. The man was right ; it was pretty serious, he thought. Across the huge expanse of park and field there was not a blade of green ; his land was a series of parched dust-brown chess squares encased by withering hedges. Summer had driven with its own fire deep into grass roots everywhere, giving pasture the look of being killed. He knew, of course, that it was not killed ; he knew grass better than that. Grass was an amazingly eternal



thing, quite indestructible, and would come again, with a shower or two, miraculously.

He drove home. Through tiredness, perhaps through the exceptional heat, he felt irritated by the sound of voices coming from the garden, over the high wall, as he put the car away.

It was only as he began to go towards the house, carrying his hat and coat over his arm, that he realised that the house, the garden and even the former pig-sty summerhouse were full of people. Fifty or sixty people were there: grinning, talking, sucking at glasses. Too late he remembered his wife's party.

'There you are!' people called to him. 'How was town? Exhausting?'

He wandered into the garden with a glass of gin in his hand. The lawn was full of a drinking, gaping, parrot-like chorus. He could not see his pergolas of late fading roses for a barricade of hats.

Out of it came his wife, moving towards him with the swift persistence of a blue silk leech. He moved to avoid her but she came on, whispering between her teeth.

'Amazing how you always manage to forget.'

Frigidly, tired, he apologised: 'I had to call at the estate office. I'm sorry.'

'Well for God's sake circulate now you're here.'

'I thought it was your party,' he said. 'Your friends.'

She gave him a curious fleeting malignant shadow of a grin that he did not understand for some moments afterwards.

'Some of your friends are here too,' she said.

She moved away, holding her glass well above the line of her face as she squirmed across the party-crushed lawn. It might have been a touch of triumph about something, but he was too tired to give it a second's further thought.

He wandered to where, at the end of the lawn, the first rose-purple Michaelmas daisies drooped like tired feathers among bronzy gold and scarlet dahlias in the heat. The garden was going to pot, he thought, absolutely and completely to pot; and after people had called to him for the fifth or sixth time 'Hullo, Fitzgerald. How was town? Pretty grim I expect?' he decided his obligations were all fulfilled.

There was time to have one more drink before he got the car out and drove across the park to where, as always, the girl would be waiting.

#### THE GRASS GOD

But suddenly, out of the crowd of parrot-heads and hats and glasses, he saw her there, on the lawn, not thirty feet away, watching him.

He felt himself go cold, drained of reaction. He could not move. He could not even lift his glass to his mouth. For more than a minute he simply stood staring at her, stunned and cold and without thought.

She was wearing a dress of pale yellow with a narrow black belt and long black gloves. Yellow was her favourite colour. Now it seemed to make her look taller than ever. The waist of the dress was rather high, and her long beautiful legs seemed to give the whole of her body a wonderfully elegant and elevated slenderness. Nothing she could have worn, he thought, could have thrown her so much into relief against the crowd of gabbling, sucking faces.

Recovering a little, he looked across the lawn and raised his glass to her. It seemed to him that she looked deliberately away.

For the second time he felt himself go cold. He was shot through by a ridiculous and paralysing thought that she was never going to speak to him again. Always, at the back of his mind, there had been the notion that somehow, one day, for perhaps the most trivial of reasons, she would let him down. Now it came back.

It was not until he had lifted his glass to her a second time and she had looked away again, avoiding him completely, that he felt the full bleak pain of it. She was there, but suddenly she did not want him. He felt himself turn sick. He looked at her again, and again she turned away. She was wearing a large lacy transparent hat that matched her dress. Black yellow-stamened flowers were clustered on one side of it and the soft brim came down and touched her shoulders. And finally and completely, as she turned her back, the hat shut him away.

He went back into the house, stopped to get himself another drink from a tray in the hall. Always, at parties, he felt himself to be a stranger in his own house. People like beetles crawled about the place, admiring glass and furniture, gabbling, shouting to make themselves heard.

'How does the drought affect you?' someone said, and he found himself in a corner with his local rector, a man with a face like a knobbed and polished club.

For some moments he exchanged absent-minded hopes and pleasantries about the prospect of rain.

'We are offering prayers,' the rector said.

'Are you?' he said.

He excused himself and went to get a third drink. Draining it down, he knew suddenly that he was being quite ridiculous, that he was behaving like a fool. It was perfectly obvious that she could not possibly speak to him there. Only an idiot could have failed to see that she was behaving in the only possible and sensible way.

'Your wife has a genius for parties,' someone said. 'They are always terrific.'

With a stab of anger he remembered Cordelia. Malignant, leech-like, draining Cordelia. For the first time his mind was clear. Cordelia with the genius for parties, Cordelia with the nice notion of inviting the girl: stupid of him not to have seen that it was all Cordelia.

Out in the garden, as she passed him, Cordelia smiled. Its infuriating slightness seemed to propel him blindly to the far side of the lawn. He searched vainly for the yellow dress. The party was thinning out a little and now people began to come to him and shake hands, to thank him and say good-bye.

'You must thank my wife,' he said. 'She's the genius who does these things.'

He walked beyond the pergola to where, in the vegetable patch, a few people were walking apart from the crowd. Here two tall prop-like maiden ladies poked with grey silk parasols at the cracked earth across which even weeds were blue and flaccid with drought.

'We do not understand the vegetables with the purple flowers,' they said to him. 'They are new to us.'

'Artichokes.'

'Oh! no, surely. They grow underground.'

'There are two kinds,' he said.

'How extraordinary, how interesting.'

Suddenly, from behind high half-withered rows of flowerless beans, he saw the flash of the yellow hat and dress.

'But does one eat them?' the ladies said.

'One eats the top.'

The girl, with the woman he took to be her sister, was coming up the path. He stared straight at her. His body was shot through with a single quivering start of pain as he saw the long slender legs moving under the yellow dress; he saw the taut full breasts, through the thin summery material, quivering slightly as she

#### THE GRASS GOD

walked. He tried for a moment or two to fix the dark elongated eyes, but they did not look at him.

'How does one eat it?' the ladies said. 'It is like a thistle.'

'One eats it at an earlier stage,' he said.

The girl, only four or five yards away, was looking straight ahead.

'Cooked?' the ladies said. 'One eats it cooked of course?'

'Like asparagus,' he said. 'With sauce.'

'Strange how one never comes across it.'

'It's eaten more in France,' he said.

As he spoke the girl came level with him and he stepped aside to let her pass. He thought how extraordinarily beautiful she looked and he was moved by an intolerable impulse to touch her hand as she went by. For a moment it obliterated everything. He felt he had never wanted anything in his entire life quite so much as that. It filled him with a painful, blinding sort of hunger and there was nothing he could do.

'Well, thank you, Mr. Fitzgerald,' the ladies said. 'It is Mr. Fitzgerald, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'We were not certain. We know your wife much better of course.'

He did not speak again. Wandering vaguely back into the crowd, across the lawn, he was aware simply, with dry and lacerating emptiness, that the girl had gone.

When the last car had driven away he walked upstairs to his room. It was dark and he felt he did not want a light. But as he came along the landing a door opened, a shaft of light pounced across the stairs, and he saw Cordelia waiting there in her dressing-gown.

'Good night,' he said.

The house was hot and stale. Suddenly he did not want to be in it any longer. He turned to go downstairs.

'I must say she's very beautiful,' Cordelia said.

'Is there any need to talk about it?'

'I think we ought to talk about it.'

'I don't see why,' he said. 'I'm going down for a drink.'

As he reached the top of the stairs Cordelia said:

'I want to talk about it. Now.'

'Oh?'

With astonishing and unexpected directness she said:

'The whole district is stiff with gossip. There has been dirty, evil, rotten gossip.'

'They're not happy unless they have a little gossip,' he said.

'Happy!' she said. 'It's nice the way you talk about happy.'

'I didn't want to talk,' he said.

He had not ceased walking down the stairs. Now, half-way down, he heard her scurrying after him, her voice bitterly running too in a series of leaf-like whispers:

'You might at least have the decency to stand still while I say something!'

'All right,' he said. He had reached the foot of the stairs. He could hear the two maids washing glasses in the kitchen. 'I'll stand still.'

'Not here,' she said. 'Not here.'

He unlocked the cellarette on the sideboard and found the whisky. With the decanter in one hand and a glass in the other he walked to the door.

Out on the narrow courtyard the scent of late summer, heavy and intoxicating with tobacco flowers, was so delicious that he walked for ten or fifteen yards, breathing fresh sweet air, before he realised she was following him.

'If you'd have the decency to stand still a minute I could say what I have to say.'

'I'm standing still.' He mocked her with an arresting flick of the decanter. 'One minute.'

'What I want to say won't take a minute,' she said.

'Good,' he said. 'Splendid.'

Always there was the same niggling, pointless, wearisome row after parties. He did not want to listen. There could be no point in listening. He remembered suddenly, for no reason at all, the old ladies who had not heard of artichokes. They were the sort of idiotic, suburban, boring people she knew.

It was so monstrously stupid that he began laughing.

'I don't think it's any time for laughing.'

'No? There were two ladies who had never heard of artichokes,' he said. 'Your friends. Damn funny.'

'Awfully funny.'

For a moment they were both tensely silent; and then she said:

'If the joke is over I want to talk about the cottage. The one at Sandchurch. By the sea.'

'Good God, why?'



#### THE GRASS GOD

'I'm going to live there,' she said. 'You're going to give it me.'

Vaguely, at last, he began to understand what it was she had wished to speak about. A few early stars were pricking the clear darkness across the park, above coast-like undulation of trees, and he watched them, fascinated, incredulous at what he heard.

'You always get what you want,' she said. 'You always have done. In time.'

He did not speak.

'That's the way you were brought up,' she said. 'All you had to do was to scream long enough and they gave it you.' She stopped and then went on: 'I don't think you're selfish. You're just not aware of other people.'

The tobacco-plants, pale and ghost-like under the wall of the house, were almost the only things that had survived, with any freshness, the long blistering heat of summer. He took a slow deep breath and held the sweetness of them in his mouth.

'Well, you've got this,' she said. 'You wanted it all summer and now you've got it.'

Her generosity seemed to call for some sort of remark, but he could think of nothing; and she said:

'All I want is the cottage and a little place and enough to live on.'

'I think that's more than fair.'

'I'm not trying to be fair,' she said. 'But you can't go on without love, can you? It's silly to go on without love.'

For a very long time, he thought, there had never been any question of love. That, above all, had never intruded.

'Once there's no love,' she said, 'it's the end.'

Well, then, he thought, thank God there was no love.

The stars over the dark line of trees were growing brighter every moment, flashing crystal green in the hot September sky. To the right of the big house, in the hollow, reflections of fire filled the darkness, and he remembered there were hop-pickers camping there. It was lovely weather for the hopping.

In a flat voice Cordelia said:

'I apologise about the party. The girl, I mean. It was not vindictive.'

'No?'

'I didn't even know her name till this week. I didn't even believe she existed. I had to invite her to make sure.'



Well, that was decent, he thought. And really without rancour. 'I had to know her name, after all,' she said. 'I have to name her——'

For a moment it occurred to him that she was going to cry. He thought he heard her sniff in the darkness, but it might have been her shoe grating dry gravel as she turned to go. It did not strike him as curious that she did not say good night. But he said good night himself, and afterwards, as she walked away, thank you.

Later, for some time, he walked about the garden, deliciously breathing the deep scent of tobacco flowers. How wonderfully they had done all summer, he thought, how marvellously they had stood the drought where other things had failed. The sky was full of stars. An owl called with fluffy notes across the park. He walked up and down the garden, thinking. He thought of the girl, the yellow dress, her brown arms in the long black gloves, the little room, the long matchless summer and of how, at last, because of it, he was going to be free. Curious that his own key, in his own gate, in his own park, on that first evening, had begun it all.

When he went to bed he fancied he heard Cordelia crying in her room. But he was not sure; and he did not stop to see. Women cried for the oddest things, sometimes for pleasure; but mostly you never knew why.

★ 7 ★

When he drove across the park the following evening it was still very hot and the peat-land fires were still smouldering, raising smoke that hung about in thin blue-brown clouds.

He had come up to the house a little earlier than usual, and when he reached the room in the top of the house the girl was not there. He felt suddenly more than worried. He felt once again the gnawing misery of the notion that she would let him down.

For a short time he sat on the bed, trying patiently to wait for her. It was unbearably hot in the little shut-up room and he found himself sweating. It was a sweat of anxiety, touched by fear and aggravated by sun; and after ten minutes or so he could not bear it any longer.

He went downstairs, through the empty airless house and out into the front courtyard of withered grass and weeds to look for her. He walked once round the house and stood looking vainly down the long avenue, past the ruined army huts and drifts of prematurely shrivelled chestnut leaves, dead and brown on the road.

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'Sir?' a voice said. 'Excuse me, sir?'

He turned and, in a moment of sharp annoyance, saw Medhurst, touching his cap as he came from behind the army huts.

'What do you want?' he said. 'How did you know I was here?'

'I saw the car, sir.'

'What are you doing sneaking about the house here?'

'I wanted a word with you, sir,' Medhurst said. 'It was about the water.'

God, he thought, the water again. Always the water. He remembered with revulsion and annoyance the foetid hut, the naked unwashed baby. If you gave them water, Good God, they hadn't the faintest notion in hell what it was for.

'Well, what about the water? You made any use of it yet?'

'No, sir,' Medhurst said. 'We got none to use. We had none to use this three weeks.'

'You mean the well has packed up?'

'Dry as a bone, sir.'

'Then why the hell didn't you speak of it before? Why didn't you speak to Captain Fawcett?'

'I spoke to Captain Fawcett, sir. We been having water carted down there. It wasn't that, sir—'

'Then what are you cribbing about?' There was too much sir, too much lying and hedging, too much shiftiness. 'What are you driving at?'

'I can't stand another winter there, sir. We had a terrible winter and a terrible summer. The place is not fit for pigs, sir—'

He wanted to laugh; his voice broke in his throat, dryly. Impotent fury, another recollection of the ghastly unwashed hut, the little place that had been so pretty in his boyhood and was now nothing but a monstrous and sordid slum under the hazel trees: all of it clotted his tongue so that not a syllable of either laughter or fury or protest came.

'That's about as plain as I can put it, sir. I can't stand another winter—'

Where was the girl? he thought. For God's sake, where had she got to? He almost shouted:

'I've no time to go into this now. You must come down to the office. You must see me there.'

Grimly, scowling, and yet somehow smoothly and terribly polite, Medhurst said:

'I've worked for you and your father since I was thirteen——'

'Then very probably it's time you worked for 'someone else.'

'If that's the way you look at it, sir——'

'It is the way I look at it.' He was tired, impotently, wretchedly, miserably tired, and said: 'Good Christ, man, you can hear, I hope, can't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Fitzgerald turned to walk away and saw at last, far down the avenue, under the chestnut trees, the girl walking towards him. A stab of excitement and gladness whipped through his throat and he was really not listening when Medhurst said:

'I want to get this straight, sir.'

'Straight?' he said. There was a new sort of insolence in the air nowadays; there was not one of them that wasn't at heart, he thought, a damn bolshevik. 'How do you mean straight?'

'You mean I'm to go, sir?'

'I do. You see Fawcett in the morning and Fawcett will fix you up.'

'You bloody well ought to be shot, sir,' Medhurst said. 'That's what you bloody well ought to be.'

Fitzgerald walked away. Nothing annoyed him more than passages of insolent and rowdy argument with disgruntled employees on the estate. He kept an agent for that. He walked on imperviously, as if indifferently; and at last, as he reached the stone steps of the house-front, he heard from Medhurst a cold low yell:

'You ought to be shot. And there's one or two as'd be glad to do it. Me, for one!——'

He did not turn or glance or utter a word in answer as he pushed open the door and went inside the house.

He was still standing there, just inside, in the deserted empty entrance hall with its scarred and ruined panels, when the girl ran up the steps.

He felt now that he could hardly wait for her. As she swung open the door and came inside he pressed her back against it, kissing her mouth hard and for a long time. Hunger, a curious dry loneliness, an ache not at all unlike fear, held him rigid.

'God, I thought you were not coming. I had the most awful feeling——'

'Am I late? I've been busy. I tried not to be.'

He was bursting to tell of Cordelia, and said:

#### THE GRASS GOD

'Shall we go up?'

'I really mustn't stay long——'

'Not another party?' he said. Gladness that she had now arrived broke the small amusing irony about yesterday. 'Surely not a party?'

'Poor man,' she said, and laughed. 'The look on your face.' Her laugh was nothing more than a few light chuckles low in her throat. 'As if I were never going to speak to you again.'

'That's what I felt,' he said.

Upstairs, in the little room, she lay full-dressed on the bed. He sat on the end of it, looking at her, his heart crowded with a new and extraordinary tenderness. He thought of her as she had looked at the party, in the yellow dress. There, in the garden, in the yellow dress, the long black gloves and the big hat that shut him away, she had woken in him these first startling, almost frightening, impulses of new feeling. Queer that in that moment, held as it were behind a barrier set up by the two owl-like ladies talking of artichokes, in the moment when he could not touch her at all, he should have been first troubled by this uneasy, startling hunger of wanting her so much.

'I've something to tell you,' he said. What was it Cordelia had said about love? It was no use without love——

'Tell on,' she said.

Outside, in the long dead forest of grass, he fancied he heard the dry shufflings of the peacock: the wandering dainty ghost that had trailed about there behind the house all summer.

'Cordelia is going to let me go.'

The girl, staring upwards, seemed to be listening to the peacock too.

'It was really why she invited you,' he said.

'Why me?'

Her voice seemed to be echoed in the peacock's dry rustlings through dead grass.

'I think it was the yellow dress that did it,' he said. 'I think you scored quite a victory in the yellow dress.'

She did not answer. Her quietness was so strangely rapt and withdrawn and cool that it briefly occurred to him that she did not think there had, in fact, been any victory.

He lay down beside her on the bed.

'Say something, please. Say something,' he said.

On evenings in May and June, when they had first come there,

the clamorous chorus of birds and warm late evenings, just before darkness, and even after darkness, had been wonderful. Now summer had killed all bird-sound except the delicate stalking of the peacock: an irritating haunting sort of a whisper in the ruined garden, in a world that was like an old and dusty vacuum.

'I love you: that's what,' he said. 'Don't you know?' Tenderly he tried to turn her face to him and found it withdrawn and rigid. 'Don't you know? You love me too, don't you?'

'No.'

He felt himself hit between the eyes as if by a black and savage flash of flame.

'God——' As he began to speak he hardly heard her, in turn, talking quietly, almost as if to herself, as she stared through the balcony window at the hot September sky:

'It's why I was late tonight. I've been packing.'

'Packing?—— for God's sake?'

'I'm going on Wednesday,' she said. 'The day after tomorrow.'

He sucked dry dusty air through his mouth, ejecting it again in odd dead words:

'But all summer——' stupidly and incoherently he searched for words of argument——'after all that's happened—the things we've done.'

'You never mentioned love,' she said. 'You never talked about it.'

'But how can you say? It's a thing that gets hold of you. It gets down inside you. You can't say what you want it to be. How can you say?'

'You wanted it to be fun,' she said. 'That's what you said.'

Suddenly he had nothing to say. He was crushed by a dark complexity of emotions. He was not used to such complexity. His body was held rigid, in bitter paralysis, and outside in the garden the damnable, infuriating rustle of the peacock was the only sound that broke the air.

'I ought to go,' she said.

She moved as if to get up; but in an unbearable impulse to touch her, to hold her down there on the bed, he ran his hands across her neck and shoulders, and she said:

'I warned you what it might be. I warned you long ago.'

A terrible and dull soreness, like a bruise, seemed to drag downward across his chest.

'It's been wonderful and I've loved the house,' she said. 'I've



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loved everything. But everything comes to an end. I loved everything but it has to come to an end.'

He felt beaten about by emotions that were so baffling and complex that they made him feel ridiculous. It was cruelly stupid that in agony a man could feel ridiculous.

'Let me get up now,' she said. She moved her long body quietly away from him on the bed.

'May I kiss you?'

'You know you may.' She was suddenly cool and withdrawn and shut away, as she had been that first evening he had brought her there: the evening she had called him 'Careless man' as he clumsily broke the camellia flowers.

He kissed her for the last time. He wanted the kiss to flame against her mouth with the love he could not express in words; but her mouth in its responses was dry and cool, and the kiss was dry too, utterly removed from the molten complicated agony that raged inside him. He wanted to break away from the long supple body, exquisite more than ever now, always so beautiful and so obliging and so like summer, and let the agony release itself in a scream telling her that he could not bear it and that she did not understand.

Instead it was she who broke away. Sitting up, she ruffled her brown hair with her hands—with pain he loved its cat-like fluffiness, all shining and free, as it fell and rose with the toss of her head—and then swung her legs to the floor.

'It's all over,' she said. 'I'm sorry.' She touched his face with her hand. 'The summer's over.' One of her fingers seemed to draw a mark across his cheek. 'It was fun,' she said. 'Like you said it would be——'

He heard her go downstairs, her footsteps hitting emptily on the hollow treads, echoing emptily through the deserted house.

Then suddenly he heard her running back. A flash of triumph went through him. After all, he thought, she could not bear it without him; there was going to be one of those moments of reconciliation; she was coming back—he stood waiting, tensely, as he watched the swing of the opening door.

'Only the key,' she said. 'I forgot the key. You'll need it again some day——'

He left it where she let it fall on the bed. Sharply and painfully it made him remember the evening he had first given it her: the exquisite May evening of cuckoo sounds, of nightingales, among the

oak flowers and all the warm sap of spring ; and then the next evening, when she had found the camellia flowers and had wanted so much to see the house and had taunted and teased him because of his folly in not opening it, in leaving it all to emptiness and decay.

And frantically he said :

'Wait a minute. Darling, don't go for a minute. Darling, I've got something to say.'

'Well ?'

'Listen,' he said. 'Don't go. Sit down a moment——'

She did not sit down. He made an imploring, tremulous effort to draw her down to the bed, but the old dry coldness of his fear paralysed him again when he found she did not move.

'Listen—let's talk rationally.' He had never felt less like talking rationally in his life. He felt his teeth jar together, at the back of his dry mouth, making in his head a sound like the chattering of cold steel keys.

'Look,' he said, 'what would you say if I opened the house ? You always wanted me to open the house.'

'Did I ?'

'You always loved it—you always wanted it open. I could do it,' he said. 'I could open it for you——'

'You'll never open it,' she said.

'Oh ! please,' he said. 'Darling. I'd like to open it. I'd like to do it for you—open it up, open the gardens, make everything as it was——'

'You'll never open it,' she said.

He sat on the bed, making a useless and unconvincing gesture of pain with his two hands, flinging them up and pressing them against his head. Then as they fell again he let them remain against her body, frontally, on the long smooth thighs. The rigid smoothness of her body, lovely and too familiar, made no sort of movement of relaxation.

'Let me open the house for you. Let me do that,' he said. 'That's what you always wanted.'

He looked up and saw her face, charming and maddening, friendly and tender and yet distant as ever, and he knew that it was not something she had always wanted. He knew there was nothing of him she wanted. There was nothing of him she craved : neither himself, nor the house, nor even the little attendant charms she had loved as they came and went away : the camellias, the magnolias on the house wall—what was it Cordelia had said ? If

#### THE GRASS GOD

there was anything he wanted—something like that—he had simply to scream long enough and they gave it to him. He did not want to scream now, but suddenly he felt that he would have given anything, the house, the land, the grass, anything, in return for some simple gesture of hers, a word, the tiniest touch of friendliness, the merest indication that there was, after all, something of him that she wanted back. It was not too much to ask, he thought.

Instead he was aware only of the rigid, unaltered position of her body, his own dry hard loneliness, and then her voice, saying again :

‘You’ll never open it. It’s like opening a tomb. There’s only the dead inside it. Whatever there was is dead and gone—it’s finished, all this, it’s the end.’

She moved away ; the fine smooth thighs slipped out of his hands. He was tortured once again by moments of futile agony combined with the renewed sensation of feeling ridiculous as he tried to clutch her body and bring it back. He began to say something about ‘Darling, you can’t go out like this, just like this—you can’t end it like this,’ and then she combed her fingers through her loose brown hair and tossed it back from her face and looked down at him sitting there, imploring and agonised, on the bed.

‘One of us had to end it,’ she said.

Her voice was brutal. He could not look at her ; the tips of his fingers were without feeling as he brought them together, staring down.

‘It’s all dead,’ she said. ‘In your heart you know perfectly well it’s dead.’

He heard her walk away. This time he made no attempt to stop her. After what seemed a long time a breath of wind caught the balcony window and rocked it backwards and forwards against the mullion. He got up and walked across to shut it, his hands trembling so much that the shutters clattered as he pulled them together. The sun was going down fiercely, at eye-level, through a gap in the cedar trees, and for some moments, caught by the flash of it, he could not see.

Half blindly he went downstairs and then, in one of his moments of forgetfulness, not thinking of the car, he began to walk across the park.

He walked for some distance before he saw Pritchard, driving the big auger into drought-baked earth with his customary furious

energy, bare to the waist now, his face and body pouring with sweat.

'You're a perfect maniac with that thing,' he said.

'Yes: I suppose I am a bit of a maniac, sir.' Pritchard laughed. 'Just a bit——'

Fitzgerald stared at the daemonic driving auger stabbing down into burnt dead grass.

'Not finding the water now?' he said. He laughed himself, crookedly.

'Oh! yes,' Pritchard said. 'Still here. Still signs of it. It's here all right—everywhere.'

Everywhere the summer had bitten deep, almost cruelly, into earth and grass, and only a spark was needed to fire, in a flash, acres of lifeless, colourless grass and shrivelled miles of woodland.

'Oh! yes,' Pritchard said. 'The water's here. It takes more than this——'

'Any good here for the cherries I spoke about?'

'Fatal. The soil's right, the situation is right—but the water——'

'Good God, man,' he said, 'you can't be serious about the water?'

'Dead serious,' Pritchard said. 'You see on land like this it isn't the drought that kills.' He crumbled with his fingers a few grains of waterless rust-brown earth and let them fall away in a little dusty cloud. 'It's the year after. Or the year after that. That's the one that kills.'

Fitzgerald, not answering, walked on across the park. Over the heathland peat fires were burning more and more smokily, running underground where you could not put them out. All down the little valley there hung low blue-brown clouds from the fires and all across his land there was no longer a trace of the green of early summer he had loved so much, about the time of oak-flowers and the voice of the nightingale, and everywhere the grass was dead.

THE CITY OF BOSTON, FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT TO THE PRESENT TIME.

BY SAMUEL JOHNSON, ESQ. OF BOSTON.

IN TWO VOLUMES. THE FIRST CONTAINS THE HISTORY OF THE CITY, AND THE SECOND THE HISTORY OF THE PORT.

LONDON: PRINTED BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAULS CHURCH-YARD, 1773.

AND SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAULS CHURCH-YARD, 1773.

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## *Episode at Gastein*

BY WILLIAM SANSON

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Epiphany or Twelfth Day  
or Feast of the Kings

## *Episode at Gastein*

---

LUDWIG DE BRODA bowed as he passed the new young woman with her orange hair, her pensive grace. He bowed not stiffly, as his more military ancestors would have done, but with the ease of a new world, a world not of private halls but of the less formal lounges of hotels. His face he kept grave, it was unwise to smile too soon. And his eyes seemed after their first deep search scarcely to notice her—like the eyes on the ends of a snail's horns they withdrew their intrusion and stared seriously beyond her. Hers fluttered, there was recognition of his bow in her short glance of understanding, long enough only for this to be established: then they lowered, and with them slightly her head, as if this too were a bow, a half-inclination of the head, for it never retrieved itself.

He passed on, not pausing, a modern middle-aged man in a modern suit, with no trace of former graces but a certain recession of manner. He went in to dinner. He dined alone at his table in the white and gold, the hugely mirrored dining-hall.

After dinner he walked back through the lounge, noted where the young woman sat taking her coffee, called a waiter to send a tray of coffee for himself to the adjoining table and went into the toilet room to wash his hands, to comb his well-combed hair; but really for a minute to wait. It was more tactful for his coffee to be established at the table first, it would appear that the table was his habitually and not chosen intrusively to be near hers.

He judged his time patiently, so that when he walked out across the red carpet and past the gilded marble pillars, the silver coffee jug already winked its welcome opposite his chair. He pretended not to notice her. He sat down, poured and stirred his coffee, chose from a new pigskin case a cigar, lit this, and stretched himself at last at ease to look round the lounge. When his eyes met hers he allowed himself a most perceptible start. He coughed, bowed again from his chair, and looked with pained disappointment at his cigar.

'I trust the Fräulein will not be disturbed by this . . . smoke . . . ?'

#### EPISODE AT GASTEIN

She seemed not to have noticed his arrival. He repeated his question. She started, noticed him with surprise, smiled and looked at the cigar as if it were a naughty but charming child :

‘No, no. I don’t mind at all.’

‘It would be no trouble to move . . .’

‘Please—not on my account.’

‘You are very kind . . . perhaps I could offer you . . .’

But she had looked away again. She closed the interchange calmly. She did not bother to pretend to fumble with her bag. Nor even to look in a direction pointedly away from his table—she simply stared straight ahead, hardly at the hotel lounge at all, perhaps seeing nothing, simply effacing herself. But de Broda had reached an age when he was no longer nervous of a snub in these matters. Once he had been most fearful of this, now he was tired and more settled—for what could it matter?—and he leaned without hesitation towards her. For propriety’s sake he did not turn his full face, he leaned towards her sideways like a puppet that could not rotate :

‘You’re staying here for long?’

She seemed not to hear. He coughed—to offer her the excuse of really not having heard—and repeated the question. Again she started, it seemed she awoke from a slight, wide-eyed sleep, and turned to him apologetically :

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Forgive me—I asked only, is the Fräulein staying long? For the cure?’

‘Oh—I see.’ She expressed relief—it was quite as if a hand had fluttered to her heart and she had sighed. Now she could allow herself to smile easily :

‘For two weeks. No, not for the cure—for a little holiday.’

‘How strange! That is exactly my own position—we must be the only two unemployed by the waters.’

‘You forget the ski-run.’

‘Ah yes—I’m afraid I do forget that. And when I don’t forget, I regret it.’

‘Oh?’

‘Our country teems with ski-resorts. A good thing, among other things we need visitors. But it’s out of character with this old place, it spoils the—the atmosphere.’

She jutted her lower lip—he could see where the lip-rouge ended and wetter pink of the real lip began. She gave a small toss of

her orange hair—he noticed that it was really orange, not dyed. She grudged at him :

‘Atmosphere ! It’s very little use having atmosphere if you haven’t any money. Think of the townsfolk.’

‘And vice versa. What’s the use of money if there’s no one to play music ?’

‘Music ?’

‘Music. Poetry. I mean again atmosphere. The music of this curious *fin de siècle* ; these hideous hotels, these rustic promenades, this engineering of the waters—everything that with the years . . . is growing so much charm !’

‘You do not find it oppressive ?’

‘No. Let me explain . . .’

And he explained. And for an hour they talked. They agreed to walk together the next morning, he would show her something of the quality of his beloved Gastein. So the meeting was consummated, the first act was done, the game was on—with honour on both sides. Both discreet—she the withdrawer seducing, he the seducer withdrawn.

\* \* \*

These two, then, met at Gastein in Carinthia—Bad Gastein to the woman, who took things as they were ; and Wildbad Gastein to de Broda, who spent much melancholy time sensing things as they had been.

Wildbad was the old name, Wild Bath, and indeed the old mountain spa must have looked ferocious in earlier days. But still to-day for added reasons it is none the less disquieting. Still the wild rocky torrent falls five hundred feet from the plateau above to the basin beneath. It steams and bubbles and whirls perpendicular between the dark stone cliffs of a horrendous ravine, stone cliffs that echo and magnify the awful rush of the waters with a resonance as black as the walls themselves and the sombre mountain firs that rise wet and shadowy up each side. A wild and giddy place—and now two bridges have been built over the narrow ravine, each staring straight down on to the roaring water and the long-drop deadly flat pool beneath, each with a balustrade that feels too shallow to hold a man back.

But that is not all. For part of the water jets from inside the rock itself, and this water is hot, it steams, its white radio-active



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steam clouds up with the spray of the cold torrent to mist an inferno of iron winches, lock-gates, great timbers and writhing waist-thick iron pipes that climb all about the gorge—such atrocious emblems appear and vanish in the hot mist like heavy instruments of torture. Meanwhile, man came to look on. And man built up and down the walls of the cliff-sides a range of violent hotels, monster edifices whose thousand windows skyscraper not only upwards but downwards too—for their main floors open behind on to mountain streets that strike about their middles. It is as though the walls of New York were placed at a vertiginous angle above no street but a hollow staircase of water : or as if the giddy buildings of Monte Carlo were transported, paler but still unsteady, high into the mountain snows. The hotels bear such names as Grand Hôtel de l'Europe, Elizabethpark Hotel, Germania—an aristocratic fusion from the *fin de siècle* playgrounds. It is from the gilded interiors of such engines of enchanting taste that men look out on to the chasm and its torturous mists.

De Broda loved the place. He was now forty years of age, a bachelor whose parents were dead, alone in a world that had greatly changed since his youth. He had himself never known the splendours of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but remnants of the Double Eagle were impressed on his heart and he was never far from a melancholy sense sweet enough, and of a strange anticipatory nature, of those things past. He was well enough supplied with money—he had inherited houses in Vienna and land in green Styria—and he had time to spare to stay now and then in one of the older hotels at Gastein.

Recently a new experience had befallen him—he had found himself saying his name over a shop-counter and feeling the name belonged to someone else. That is, he himself had no name and his name made the vague shape of a person in his mind—someone he had known, and rather despised, who had been close to him but nevertheless remained a stranger, something of a shadowed enemy. He tried the name again, running it over his lips—but it had obviously nothing whatever to do with the flesh and bone and mind and blood that tried to believe it fitted. He thought then of the names of friends, of people he admired—each one of them, with the concrete personalities they evoked, he could imagine bearing his own name. So I am a stranger to myself, he concluded. And then : ' Of course, this is a common experience. At one time or another we all wake up to our names. They represent the past

figure of ourselves, a sort of shadowy film actor we never quite liked, of whose acting we were rather ashamed. They represent the worst in ourselves, our knowing nasty second-selves.'

But though he reasoned thus, de Broda was left with the unreasonable feeling that really—though really too he knew this was nonsense—he had no longer a name. Everyone else but he had a name. And this feeling, illogical but nevertheless lingering strong, emphasised for him his lack of a bloodmark in the world—his parentless, childless state wandering in winter the nearly empty halls of this summer spa. He felt spectral.

For the previous three years he had had it on his mind to marry : that is to say, to make a sensible effort to find a woman who would measure up to his melancholy and upon whom in return he longed to lavish all the affection frustrated and stored inside him. Such a lady he found difficult to find. Some were too frivolous, some were too severe : some liked him too much, many did not like him at all. He discounted the possibility of falling in love, it seemed too late : although he saw it was possible, it was impossible to foresee. But with masculine conceit and male vigour he did not discount the possibility that a quite young girl might find him attractive—and lately he had conceived the notion that, given youth and a fair intelligence, such a young person might be malleable in his sensitive fingers, she could be moulded in time into the form of a perfect consort. An ambitious plan, one with risks—but possible. And the prettier the woman, de Broda said to himself as he planned his dream, the better.

So he had kept his eyes open. And now they had noticed with interest and some intention the figure of this good-looking young woman with the orange hair, the pensive grace. She could not have been more than twenty-five years old.

\* \* \*

For her part, Fräulein Laure Perfuss also had hopes of a profitable holiday. She was just twenty-six years old ; and though she had felt on her twenty-fifth birthday a sense of having arrived at a never-to-be-experienced-again barrier of the years—the decimal system is engraved deeply in our hearts—now that she was twenty-six a different foreboding, almost a panic momentum towards the terrible age of thirty, had seized her. To be thirty—and unmarried ! Laure was on the look-out for a husband : or, let us

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be fair, she was inclined to observe the gentlemen she met with a more deeply considerative, a more long-range eye.

And there were other reasons for this. Unlike de Broda, but like most Austrians of upper cast, she had come down in the world. Her family had lost money and their home : now she herself lived in one room high up in a cold old mansion high up the Maria Hilfer Strasse—her mother had long ago returned to their native Tyrol. She herself was too much now of a Viennese to leave. She worked in a high-class konditorei—and though her wages were small this was the one constant pleasure of her life. Although she stood on the service side of a counter piled with trays of cakes and cellophaned sweets, it still meant for her a real connection with the old life. To that same shop she had been brought as a child by her mother. She remembered the silk blinds, tasselled, and the colour of pale creamed coffee ; silver trays of sweets flashing their softness and sugar—montelimar, dragees, pralines, a hundred cellophaned marvels ; most of all the polished wooden order of the yellow parquet floor and the great brass-trimmed counter and the tables with their smooth cane chairs—no gilt nor plush nor coloured fabrication here, only the smooth polished woods everywhere and the cakes and the silver-trayed sweets. Now, when Fräulein Laure served her customers in the middle of the morning, when the smell of coffee and scents of fur and perfume excited the air, when noise and a brisk draught of the street entered with the glass door's opening—she remembered autumns long past, when fresh from treading the yellow leaves outside, her own buttoned gaiters had swung under those same tables : and she remembered with pleasure, with no regret. Although she was on the wrong side of the counter, she could still smell the actuality of the sweet smells, she still walked among the elegancies of the room.

But—though one of the happiest states of life is to like one's work—she knew this could not go on. She was a woman, she feared the shelf. She had fallen in and out of love. Several times she had been near to marriage : but a certain hope had always held her back. Her young men, also poor, might have made excellent husbands. But they would not have provided excellent homes. Laure was simply holding on for her prince on his white steed. However, he had not come. And now she was twenty-six and already in the mirror of her mind heading hard for thirty.

In the circumstances, Bad Gastein was not the best choice for a holiday. The great old spa was three-quarters empty, the hotel

the same—but the short holiday was a gift from an aunt with romantic memories of the grand days, and Gastein had been almost a condition. As it was, this man whose card she now had in her bag, Herr de Broda, was the only unattached, the only nearly young man staying in the hotel. She assessed him carefully. He was handsome. She saw a white-skinned, dark-haired man—there was a bloom on his skin like polished bone. His hair grew thickly, it was tough and its wave oiled down, it was shaved low at the back of his neck, even beneath his collar. His dark eyebrows met to make less a satanic than a thoughtful appearance—for his eyes were large, soft, southern. Jewish or half Italian—his family had been ship-owners in Fiume. He was reserved and spoke with a laboured weariness. The 'poetic type,' she decided. In his way he was charming, really quite charming. And well mannered. And well-off.

That evening she sat at her dressing-table and thoughtfully ran the sharp edge of his card against the flesh of her middle finger. She looked down at her clear-varnished nails holding the white card: then up at her face in the mirror. She tossed her orange hair and stared. Sometimes she had idled—a little fearfully—with the idea of a rich protector. Since the war several girls she knew had affianced themselves thus—and it had not seemed to make much change in them. She stared in the mirror at her face, beautiful and saddened by such thoughts. *Her face!* How tragic that it should be given away! *Tragic.* Yes, even in marriage.

\* \* \*

The next day they walked together in the snow. It was fine January weather. The U-shaped valley lay before them many miles below, and they set out for the winding König Karol Promenade, skirting the side of the mountain along the right-hand side of the U. Above, firs rose in tiers. Their herring-bone branches glittered like marquise. Far below, with coloured villages mapped on what seemed a flat white playboard, the valley: on foggy days from these promenades, when the valley was hidden, one felt one was looking out to sea.

But now no sea—everywhere soft snow. And soundless—their footsteps soft, the sudden shush-sound of a passing sleigh, bells from below muffled, and in the immense false spring sky, blue as spring, a wide smiling sense that all occasional cries were welcomed upwards and like birds embraced in the sunlit echo of the upper air.

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De Broda was well-slept, bathed, fresh, clean. Into the warmth of his big fur coat he took deep breaths of cold magical air. He felt fine. But he felt no 'countryman' feeling: he felt no temptation to become rougher, more rustic in the way of his walk. He felt, exquisitely, that he was a townsman sipping the weather, the scenery: he was a metropolitan tasting from within his warm elegance the country air. And beside him, in her green cape and her white fur hat, walked this pleasing, graceful girl from Vienna. Her orange hair cut sharply against the white snow. What was it like? He wondered—then laughed deep inside his coat, for it was like nothing else but a patch of horse-urine in the snow. Or, should he try to say, the orange-iron mark of a mountain spring?

He said instead: 'And in Vienna, Fräulein Perfuss—do you live still with your family? Or have you your own—but these are hard days to find a flat . . .'

'I live alone.'

'A career girl? What times we move in!'

'I work a little.'

'Let me guess—the arts? No? Then I have it—you design clothes! That cloak . . .!'

'Wrong again.'

She laughed—it was carefully a light careless laugh—and put her hand up to shade her eyes pretending to look out over the valley. She could tell him about that job much later.

'You're very inquisitive,' she laughed.

He spread his hands: 'Inquisitive? No. Interested—yes! Perhaps because I hope we are going to be very good friends—it's most natural to be interested.'

'In that case I shall listen to you first. Talk to me about yourself. Tell me about the things you like.'

He was only too glad. Her education could commence immediately.

He halted abruptly in the snowy track and pointed. 'I like that,' he said.

They were just below the great façade of the Germania, golden-buff in the snow. Its terraces descended to the path, the bark-balustrated woodland promenade on which they stood. Over the near hedge of snow, on the nearest terrace, rose a small wrought-iron kiosk. Icicles hung from its summer roof. It looked like a prettily iced cake. 'You can smell the lilac,' he said.



She looked up at him and sniffed : ' Lilac ? ' she asked. Her eyes narrowed, peering for the joke.

' I mean, you can feel the gardens as they are in summer. But—winter has stolen the scent of lilac, time the scent of patchouli.'

' It looks pretty draughty to me,' she said.

He laughed. But he continued. His voice lingered about the ironwork, then rose up to the great hotel above. He spoke of the dresses of the ladies in the Emperor's day, of the carriages, all the wealth of leisurely fashion before the Wars. She listened, staring at the little kiosk with its eagle emblem. She found him dull. But he was careful to picture in the scene the things she might like—muffs, gloves, fans, jewellery—and once or twice she caught his mood, she felt a pleasing sorrowful pang.

They stood and looked back over the valley to where the hub of the spa bridged its ravine like a many-windowed Bridge of Sighs. There had been a heavy fall of snow ; all around, on each separate object—a small bush, a balustrade, a rustic fence—the fall had moulded a strange snow-shape, fat and round and always benevolent. De Broda went on to tell his Fräulein Perfuss of the many famous figures of the near past who had visited the spa, and who by virtue of merely their uniforms and their figuration in a more ample age had become figures of distant charm. He told her of Bismarck. He told her how the Emperor himself had come to open the small mountain railway station—there was a plaque there commemorating the event.

By now Laure gave him all her attention. She was interested—at the way he spoke and possibly by what he said. For his part, de Broda felt his usual satisfaction in speaking of these things. When he spoke of them his imagination widened and they came even closer. But usually he discussed them—now he found he was teaching, he was feeding words and scenes to the upturned and—yes!—interested face by his side. He felt himself grow physically bigger.

They walked slowly back. The crisp air, the altitude, the wintry sunlight enlivened them. The very orderliness of the place, within the soft disorder of snow, was pleasing. They passed a Kurhaus, a Pediküre-salon—this was a spa for the aged ; well-conducted, comfortable and safe. Down past the old Straubinger Hotel, grey-green and cream against the snow : past Stone and Blyth, the English tailors : past false pink marble, past a stucco Greek mask and grapes, past a stone stag's head—each

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framed by the white snow : past the entrance of the old Wandelbahn, the long glazed gallery—how thoughtful !—for walking in wet weather : and suddenly de Broda stopped. By the entrance of a hotel he had found a new treasure—something he had never seen before. Excitedly, he drew Laure's attention to it.

It was a miniature copper Chinese pavilion screwed to the wall. In the tarnished copper frame of the pavilion old and dusty charts were set, and dials and needles. It was called, in restrained lettering, 'Lambrecht's Wettertelegraf und Thermo-Hygroscop.' What slow mystery was enacted here ! What an air of the diligent, hush-voiced laboratory ! De Broda was delighted. Again simply the sense of something of an older decade—irrespective of æsthetic worth—claimed him. He began to speak at length, thrilledly. He invented a myth to suit its solemn inauguration on that wall years ago, he described with wit the wonder, almost the terror this strange little pavilion had evoked among an ailing aristocracy of the time. 'That's progress !' 'But what is the pen writing, what then is it writing ?' 'Chinese, of course,' the General had answered.

He suddenly found he was talking to himself. Laure had moved a foot or two aside and was peering, as decently as she could, at a group of film photographs advertising the nearby cinema.

\* \* \*

Separately, at six o'clock, they lay in their thermal baths, thinking.

'Not so good,' de Broda thought. 'A waste of time. Films !' He gave a vicious whisk to the black hoselength lurking like an eel with him in the grave-deep bath.

Along the quiet corridor, up some stairs, and down another corridor, Laure too lay naked in deep warm water.

'Wettertelegraf !' she pouted to her legs floating white, dead, detached. 'Really !' She patted the china tassel of the bellrope with a pettish groan. 'What does he expect a girl to . . .'

'She ought to understand,' he said aloud, 'that there are other interests in life than, than . . .' He heard his voice echoing round the tiles. It sounded like someone else intoning at him. Instinct drifted his hand across the most intimate nakedness.

'Why doesn't he behave like a normal man ? Why doesn't he say something like . . . like what normal men say ?' She switched herself round frowning, clutching the bath-steps for

support, and looked up at the brass-bound clock in the wall. Five minutes more. Five minutes to lie warm and think. She looked down her long white body and watched her hair float up like the feelers of a pale anemone.

So they lay in their big private baths and gave themselves to the warm healing water. Neither needed healing. But in such tiled seclusion, in the little tall rooms with their ample graves of water, and with the high black windows above showing the white beat of the snow outside, demonstrating as an aquarium feature all the coldness of the Carinthian mountain night outside against the warmth within—in such clean tiled seclusion and such large warm water not only the body but also the mind was healed.

'Come, come,' de Broda thought. 'Don't let's be intolerant. Don't let's be hurried. It was only a lapse—why, in any case, shouldn't she like the films? A young girl has her interests. There are very good films too. Sometimes. She was really most charming . . . that is, earlier . . .' And alone there his lips parted in a wide smile as he remembered the pleasant feelings he had, the expended sense of himself, before the unfortunate matter of the Wettertelegraf. Then he kicked his foot right out of the water in self-reproach. 'Vanity!' he said sternly. He stared suddenly hard at his big toe sticking up as from a separate body. There were several long black hairs streaming down before the nail. 'Why,' he thought in wonder, 'I've never noticed those before.'

Laure grew warmer and more comfortable. 'Still, I like a man to be different. He's different, all right.' She grimaced. Then, suddenly startled by all the water round her, wondered: 'Should I put my head under?' She decided not. Relieved, she thought: 'He's really rather *charming*. He'd be a credit. I can just see him at the head of the table, a party for just six . . .' And her mind crept about silver candlesticks, a glitter of glasses, and the form of de Broda across the polished table with his polished manners so ably discoursing—he inclined a little forward to the lady seated on his right. That lady too inclined forward, her eyes never leaving his face . . . Laure rose with an abrupt splash and began soaping herself severely. 'As for *her* . . .' she muttered decisively.

'I wonder,' de Broda mused, 'what her body's like?' He thought hard, suspended now on the water on his stomach, only his chin jutting on to one of the marble steps and supporting all.

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It proved difficult to imagine a strange woman's body : a known one was always substituted. ' Anyway, she's beautiful.'

' But I suppose,' she thought, ' I suppose he's hairs all over . . . '

And he who liked most kinds said ponderously to himself. ' She's just my type.'

' Laure ! ' She giggled to herself as she made an untranslatable pun.

\* \* \*

During the next few days they saw much of each other. They went for sleigh-rides up and down the mountain tracks. The sleighs were trimmed with brass and curved ironwork, their high seats were padded with green plush—and as they carved their soft-belled way through the steep alleys, as they passed fir trees with fretted branches moulded by snow to look themselves like huge fir-cones, as they mounted to Rudolfshöhe or descended past a curtain of icicles to the lower rocks, all was romantic, all most alt-oestereichisch. The sleigh-drivers wore moss-green hats or hats of Styrian black and emerald. But once—much to de Broda's disgust—one of them wore an old leather flying-bonnet. De Broda had noticed this the moment they approached the line of sleighs waiting for hire. And he had shuffled about in the snow for a few minutes, hoping someone else would take the man. But no—and Laure had looked at him suspiciously as he made false conversation. He was about to try to explain to her—and suddenly found this impossible. It would sound like so much whimsy. Such refinements are only communicable between people of similar taste. And he had, in fact, too good a sense of humour to persist—so they had hired the man. The drive was nevertheless spoiled. He could not take his eyes off that flying bonnet.

However, that morning produced its great compensation. They descended at one of the largest of the enormous hotels. There in the immense empty lounge they had ordered glasses of the bubbling spa water itself—for it was too late for coffee. Cold water after the brisk cold drive ! They had laughed. And for some reason he had mentioned—perhaps *à propos* of the desolate air of an out-of-season hotel—the works of Thomas Mann. She had read them. And she had read much else. To his surprise he found she had developed quite a reasonable taste in literature. He found with joy that at last they had one taste in common.

But why ? He thought of a girl's life, of her gentle up-bringing and of the hours of careful seclusion imposed on her. He did not

think of the hours of seclusion imposed on a working girl, hours in a room alone with an empty purse. However, in a way and not knowing it, he was right. For without her early education, Laure might have preferred to books the little radio, or hour-long experiments with her own face in the mirror.

Thenceforward they talked a lot about books. Once, de Broda found himself wondering: If she has read so much, if her imagination is thus so livened—why does she not respond more easily to the other things I talk about? The senses of time? Myths of the past? Could I—after all—be phrasing these things badly? He could not believe so. But then he did not know that books for Laure were in the first place a last resort. When she was out and about—and especially now on her holiday—her desire was for action and life. Though she understood much of de Broda's discourse, she was impatient of it. She listened with half an ear. She wanted to escape sentiments that in her reading she had only half-experienced, for in its way the grey page was a prison.

Still, they had a subject in common. It greased their passage. As the days went on, they became more intimate. However—it was not all easy. There was the afternoon, for instance, when it snowed again. Even the quiet air of Gastein grew quieter. Sounds underfoot were muffled by the old snow, and the new fall filled the air with a dizzy, kinematic flicker. One looked up, and the white sky was black with flakes forever dropping: one looked at the black firs and the dark plastered houses and the flakes fell white: it was the sight of so much falling without sound that added to the soundlessness. In such air they walked a little—snow mounted and melted in Laure's orange hair, on the brim of de Broda's hat. To avoid getting wet through they turned into an hotel. The light was fading. It was time for coffee.

Out of the soundlessness of the snow—through the double swingdoors into steamheat and light and suddenly voices from everywhere!

'It's not!'

'It is!'

'Der Bobby!'

'Bobby! In Gastein!'

And for a moment it seemed an endless number of people in high spirits and smart clothes crowded round de Broda. He was startled, confused—and then annoyed. These were old friends from Vienna, friends from ten years ago when he had led—despite



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the time, perhaps because of the times—a gayer and more frivolous life. Before the worm had crept in—before he had reached that point in early middle years when a tiredness, a certain intolerant familiarity with life had claimed him. One could not call this a false tiredness ; but it was disproportionate ; and perhaps a little later on it would melt with the tolerance of years and he would regain some of his easier, earlier, priceless, worthless joys.

But now he had the worm. And greeted by this group of light people he felt angry, embarrassed and ashamed. Indeed, the latter he might be allowed—for this little lot were not the best kind of company. They might have been gay, but they made a strident flashy exhibition of themselves too. They talked, among the quiet coffee drinkers, at the tops of their voices : in their actions they pirouetted and gestured with too great an ease—their absolute indifference to the room was a conscious insult, a boordom.

‘ But Bobby—you must come with us ! ’

‘ Here—this table by the piano ! ’

‘ Egon’s going to play ! ’

‘ Oh—the Bobby . . . how serious ! . . . this way to the museum, please ! ’

De Broda had so many to shake hands with that he had time to plan his retreat. With his back to Laure—whom he had not introduced—he made his face into a mask of theirs and winked at them. He winked that he wanted to be alone with his little piece. Ah, they thought, the Bobby ! The old Bobby ! And instantly they acknowledged the formality of the occasion—it was the only convention they bowed to. They nodded knowingly and left him.

De Broda led Laure over to the furthest end of the room. He felt ashamed that he had denied his real personality ; thus he was awkward.

‘ Awful people,’ he apologised, ‘ I’m so sorry.’

‘ But they seemed quite gay.’

‘ I used to know them once—a long time ago.’

They ordered coffee. Near them hung a picture of a fat German Count—a famous and ferocious General—seated on a horse. He was in full hunting dress, and from his magnificent eminence on the great stallion he held proudly in his hand a single, desolate dead hare. It was entitled : ‘ Jagd.’

De Broda tried to find some æsthetic quality in the picture, found none, and was driven to talking again of the atmosphere of



period it now described. Laure listened, but listlessly. Meanwhile the other party had grouped themselves round the piano, and the Hungarian Egon—a small round dapper man with a black moustache, an oiled and energetic man—had begun to play the piano. The others hummed, then broke into song. It was a tango: 'Küss' mich heut' portugiesisch.' One or two of the other people in the lounge looked round and smiled. An old man shook his head, but benevolently, behind his paper. Plainly the room was not so insulted as de Broda had thought. Laure's eyes gleamed a growing delight.

Suddenly she turned to him; 'Why don't we go over there?'

'But Laure . . . !'

'So little happens here—they look fun. *Do let's!*'

He felt sad and funless, clumsily and drily a spoiler of fun. He felt how much older he was. Yet persisted:

'Look, Laure—those are silly people. They're not worthwhile. I don't want you to know them.'

'But they're your friends?'

'Of a kind—of an old vintage, gone sour.'

'I'm not so sure who's sour.' She paused. 'Why don't you want *me* to meet them? Why *me*?'

He made an earnest expression. He made a grave, thoughtful face of care for her:

'Because, Laure, I take *you* seriously.'

It should have worked. But it didn't. It was a mistake. It gave Laure exactly the confirmation of his interest in her that she had wanted. He had never said anything like that before, and the spoken word, however often it is spoken, is important.

Power is an ugly word. Let us say it gave her a feeling of certainty, and with this of exhilaration.

'Oh how sweet!' she smiled. And then giggled. ' . . . Bobby dear!'

He was still looking shocked when she put her finger to her lips and, standing up, asked him to excuse her. She went as if to the ladies' room. But on the way she passed the piano, just as 'Kiss me to-day in a Portuguese way' was coming to an end. Not stopping, she smiled at them unreservedly and sang out the last two bars. They clapped. And she was out through the swing doors.

So that when after a few minutes she returned they felt they knew her and implored her to sing more with them. She did, and for a long time she stood and chatted and laughed and sang.

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De Broda was left alone with the German Count and his hare. He stared up at the picture and fumed.

\* \* \*

But later, lying in his warm appeaseful bath, he forgave her. After all, she didn't know the crowd in question. And it showed she was lively. A girl should have her fun. It was indeed, he concluded happily, a very rare combination—an intelligent girl, an *intellectual* girl with a liking for liveliness. But he thanked heaven the party had already driven off back to Vienna.

\* \* \*

Two days later, up towards the Villa Cäcilie, a young man skied straight into them.

They all fell down.

But no one was hurt. The young man had come fast round the bend, had tried to check as he saw them, had struck a patch of ice, but then in fact had fallen and come only slithering into them on his behind. De Broda had thrown Laure back into the snow and himself across her. Now, surprised and covered with white patches, they all sat in the snow and felt themselves. Only Laure laughed.

The young man—he was plainly a visitor, he wore no local fawn or green but a dark blue ski-suit and a long peaked cap—was most apologetic. He asked repeatedly if they were not hurt? He showed not only politeness but real concern. De Broda was mollified. He laughed, shaking the snow off his coat, and assured the young man that no harm was done. He felt rather pleased that he had thrown himself in protection across Laure.

That evening the young man called at their hotel. He held some tickets in his hand. He was dressed in American clothes, but moved with European gestures of courtesy.

'I can't forgive myself for this morning's accident . . . it really was so foolish of me,' he said to de Broda. 'Please let me make some slight recompense—there is a gala dance tomorrow at the . . .'

'But my dear fellow, don't for a moment think—'

'I would be honoured if your daught—if the Fräulein and yourself would be my guests.'

He turned for the first time to Laure.

'You must persuade him, Fräulein!'

Of course de Broda had not missed that suppressed 'daughter.' His instant reaction was to accept, to show how young he was, to show he could dance as gaily as anyone else. But reactions have their own reactions: and irritated by the youthful parade forced upon him, and moved also by his underlying dislike of dancing—he protested that he himself did not enjoy such evenings at a holiday resort. He inferred that they could be better had in the metropolis.

It was half-past seven, the cleaned and rested hour after the bath. De Broda, comfortable and thus the more generous, gestured towards Laure. 'But naturally,' he said, 'if Fräulein Perfuss would like to go—'

The young man said nothing; but he looked at Laure with a polite questioning smile. Consideratively, as though this kind of invitation occurred nightly at Gastein, Laure said: 'Well—let's see, tomorrow night. No, I'm not doing anything. I don't think—yes, I'd be delighted to accompany you.'

'Excellent!'

Then the young man, out of politeness, without much emphasis, tried again to persuade de Broda.

'No, no, no. I wouldn't think of it. You two enjoy yourselves.' He held his hand up to ward off finally all protestation. Then: 'But I must introduce you—Fräulein Perfuss. And my name is de Broda.'

'Peter Hörnli. Enchanted.'

'Hörnli?'

'From Zürich.'

'Ah! And how are you finding our Carinthia?'

After a while the young man left. They agreed he seemed a nice enough young fellow. De Broda felt pleased and strangely possessive. It showed him, really for the first time, how intimate they had become in these few days. He knew, and it pleased him to know, that he could let her go off for an evening without fear. Besides, the chap was just a young Swiss.

\* \* \*

Laure seemed to have appreciated his action. She grew even more charming during the next few days. She had enjoyed the

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dance very much, she said. It was a change. Herr Hörnli had proved a most pleasant companion.

Then one evening, two days later, de Broda took her up above Gastein to dinner in an inn on the Bockstein plateau. Plateau? It was another valley, another great U above the Gastein U. In Gastein one could think there was nothing higher, in Gastein one had touched the sky. But lo! a five-minute walk up the mountainside that enclosed the great valley—and there one was on the ground floor of another valley again enclosed by horseshoe mountains! One felt this stepped ascent might go on for ever, it was like entering a hall of mirrors! In such discovery there is magic. Laure and de Broda, stepping up on to Bockstein, felt as if they had entered a dream. And that evening was indeed enchanted.

First, the magic of discovering such a valley—as mysteriously exciting as a strange garden discovered in childhood, a garden through a gate in a wall, a garden that one feels, in the instant one finds it, will disappear the next day never to be found again. Secondly, the snow had ceased to fall, and a clear crescent moon stood high in the sky casting blue light everywhere: icicles in fir-trees flashed this light, and one saw how people had first thought of putting tinsel on Christmas trees. They went into an inn and ate trout freshly fished from the rocky river: trouts cooked in butter from the cream of the valley, herbed from the valley, and followed down by a bottle of one of the valley's cold clear reingold wines. Coffee, imported on a tired schilling, was hell. But then out into the moonlight, out cleansing the mouth with the smell of snow, and a wine-warmed walk to another inn just across the way. In there, a live merriment prevailed; it was the weekly zitherabend. Two squat coarse men with faces of the mountains, gnome-faces with close eyes and great noses, plucked at the little stringed boards before them. Their fingers were broad and swollen, too big for the finely-laid strings. Yet they plucked, plucked with curiosity—as if this were a strange cabalistic game and the zithers magic boards—and out sang the heavy little mountain waltzes.

More wine, and de Broda found himself linking arms and leaning close against a warm, flushed, happy Laure. Sometimes everybody in the room sang and thumped the tables, and Laure and de Broda sang too. They were closer, easier, more comfortable with each other than ever before. In that white room, clean as a dairy, and among the villagers in their sober suits and their drunken orderliness—they had touched an atmosphere removed a

hundred miles from the grave majesty of Gastein. By some miracle of ventilation, the smoke of cigars vanished instantly ; much wine was drunk, yet none spilled ; it was unusual and dreamlike to see so many swaying wine-filled bodies and to hear such boisterous music in so orderly, so white and scrubbed a room. But this was no place of Swiss prettiness, it was heavy and solid.

De Broda was enjoying himself. He felt relaxed and blank-minded and lightheaded. Occasionally he tried to pull himself—as he called it—together. How could the hour be improved ? Once, he remembered that Count Czernin's shooting-box stood along the valley : and he began to speak of this. But he soon stopped.

Suddenly Laure put her arm round his neck and kissed him.

It was at the end of a song which she had been humming to herself, smiling down at the wine-flask. The song ended with three long waltz-beats. On each chord she gave him a long decided kiss on the lips.

De Broda was surprised to find himself not at all astonished. It seemed the most normal thing. Not, indeed, that it was unusual for a couple to kiss at a time of music and wine. Nor, very naturally, was it unexciting. No, it was exciting. But still—normal, as though it had been ordained, as though it might already have happened before.

As the songs were sung, as the wine-flasks emptied, they kissed again. De Broda, for once speechless, murmured only her name. Laure said nothing. She was by no means drunk : but there was about her a carelessness and a flushed bright enchantment. She seemed full of secret thoughts—secrets that made her blush and smile into herself. Now and then she held her head back from de Broda and looked at him carefully, her lips parted in peculiar interest, half-closed eyes seeming to measure him.

They left, and arm-in-arm walked down the snowy hill-road. At the escarpment edge Gastein came into view, they were just above the huddled high roofs—it looked a strange metropolis huddled in the moonlit gorge. Nearby the waterfall drummed. They left the road, and stamped through moss-mounds of snow to the bridge over the fall. There they stood and gazed with wonder and with fear at the spectacle beneath.

Wide in front the moonlit valley—white and wide, with the mountainsides tinselling their firs into blue-black distance. But just beneath only darkness and the cold roar of ceaseless water.



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Sound echoed from the rock walls round them, such a weight of water has a machine roar, the light wooden bridge itself seemed to drum with the sound. De Broda put his arm round Laure. They stood close together, moved by the great beauty around them; close too against the beautiful greatness of the fearful thing below them.

The cold air exhilarated, it was sparkling clear and mixed wonderfully with the warm wine-fumes. A great joy seemed to swell within de Broda's breast, he bent closer to her profile so sadly, so beautifully incised in the moonlight—and with a blessed sense of release the words of a proposal rose to his lips.

'Laure, dearest Laure . . .' he whispered.

She turned to him.

And then suddenly the long elegant worm inside rose, the delicate worm bit him. As it bit, his lips made themselves thinner, he felt his eyes focus clearer. 'No,' murmured the cold emotionless worm, 'no. Don't be overtaken by events. You did not decide to do this yet. You decided to take exactly your own time, choose your hour, seek your setting. In another couple of days, you said.'

'Laure,' de Broda said, 'let's go.'

\* \* \*

The next morning he came down late, enquired for Laure, and was told she had already left for a walk. It had become their custom to spend the mornings together, and he was a little irritated. However, he blamed himself for rising so late, put on his coat and went out.

It was a beautiful morning. He decided to descend the steep paths by the waterfall itself, and found himself in strange country. Great conduit pipes like sleeping boas wandered among the snow and jagged rock; rusted winches and lock gates draped their curtains of icicle: such a vast old machinery astounded, and steam from the hot spring rose all around against the snow. Down there, deep in the gorge, the roar of the torrent drowned all other sound. De Broda was fascinated; but not for more than a quarter-hour. Normally he enjoyed a solitary walk, normally he was delighted to escape companionship. But not that day. He began to find himself uneasy for Laure's company.

She did not appear at luncheon.



He spent the afternoon wandering from hotel to hotel in the hope of seeing her. He ended the afternoon with a book, and went up to his bath early.

But once more the comfort of those waters put him at his ease, and it was in good temper that he descended to dine. For a number of reasons—because until the previous night they had been not on intimate but only on familiar terms, because also de Broda had been taking his time and had wished to maintain some independence, and moreover because the very size of the great mirrored and pillared dining-hall suggested a propriety that linked each table privately with each guest—they had not dined at the same table. So, since that evening Laure came down late, they did not meet until after dinner.

De Broda was careful to seem unconcerned. He waved an invitation to her from his coffee table—the distance of manners between the lounge and the dining-room, in fact no more than an inch of curtained glass door, might have been a mile—and Laure smiled her way over.

He did not ask her anything, but entered instantly into a discourse upon his own day :

‘ . . . one might have been on a harbour quay, such extraordinary machinery for controlling the water, and on each side the hotel walls, like wharves . . . ’

‘ Really ? ’

‘ . . . and far, far above, against the sky, our bridge . . . ’

‘ Our bridge ? ’

‘ I mean, the bridge we stood on last night. ’

‘ Oh, my dear, of course. ’

A pause. De Broda risked a tender look. He felt truly tender : only his mind, his mind layered with experience, made it a risk.

Laure smiled brightly back. There was something inside her bubbling to come out. Suddenly it came :

‘ You know,’ she said—and her lips dropped as though she ought not to say it—‘ at least you don’t know, you’d never guess where I’ve been today ! ’

Desperate to control himself, de Broda made a blank, bored face that in other circumstances might have looked plain rude. But Laure was too concerned to notice.

‘ I daren’t tell you,’ she said, ‘ I daren’t ! ’

He managed a smile : ‘ Then you must keep it a dead secret. No ! Not a word ! ’

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Laure's mouth hung still half-open. She stopped astonished. Then a look of such disappointment came into her eyes that even de Broda saw he was being too cruel. He leaned closer and making a play of conspiracy whispered: 'A secret—but let *me* into it.'

She took a deep breath:

'I've been ski-ing!'

It was so much a reverse of all he wished for that he forgot himself:

'Ski-ing! Why? Who on earth with?'

'Oh . . .'

She pretended nonchalance:

'Herr Hörnli.'

'Who . . .? Oh, that young Swiss?'

'Yes. He passed the hotel earlyish—long before you were up. (How's the head by the way?) We talked a few minutes. Then he said why didn't I ski and he would teach me. It was such a beautiful morning I went.'

De Broda regained himself with a pale smile: 'So you went up and I went down.'

'Can't say—I didn't go down once or twice too,' she giggled. De Broda laughed uneasily.

'But you enjoyed yourself?'

'Mm. It was lovely.'

And she went on to tell him all about it. She told him how fine the air was, what fun it had been, where they had lunched, how they had tobogganed home.

'It was difficult again at first,' she finished. 'But I'll soon get used to it.'

De Broda had been thinking—in the tolerance of his chair and the coffee and the lovely brightnesses of her smile and her hair—thinking how after all a day out must have made a refreshing change. But at her last words he properly flinched:

'Get used to it?'

'Yes. I'm going to concentrate.'

'But Laure—you've only four days left!'

'That's exactly it. Only four days. I'll have to work hard.'

'You're going ski-ing every day?'

'Oh yes.'

'But Laure—our walks together, we were going . . .'

'Ludwig dear—*please*. You know I was supposed to be having

a holiday. It's as much for my health as anything. After being cooped up in that . . . in Vienna, I really owe it to myself.'

'Then I won't be seeing much of you.'

'Oh Ludwig—yes. In the evenings.'

'It's not much.'

'So you don't want to see me in the evenings?'

'You know I didn't mean that.'

'But you *said* so.'

'No, please Laure, dearest—how can I put it—I meant . . .'

And for a few minutes they lightly quarrelled. De Broda grew more flustered and more apologetic. With fine petulant logic she undressed all his well-meaning. De Broda found himself physically sweating and gasping a little for breath.

Laure relaxed. And de Broda was so much relieved that together they spent a quiet pleasant evening.

Yet every so often de Broda remembered the kisses of the night before, and glanced at her curiously. How could she seem to forget so quickly? How retreat so easily to her earlier distance from him? Retreating to lead him on? It didn't feel like it.

The wine? Perhaps. But he thought not. And he contented himself by shaking inside his polite face a worldly-wise head. 'Women!' his wisdom said. It explained nothing. It excused everything. 'Women—they're unpredictable!' he repeated, and felt much better.

\* \* \*

Had he been alone, that is truly alone, he would have delighted in the great blue winter weather and enjoyed a long walk on the white mountainside. But he was less alone than lonesome. So the next day found him impatient of the mountains and simply drifting about the small centre of Gastein itself. He knew he was alone until the evening, the whole day was free—but he could make no decision. In fact what he had to do was simply wait until she returned. Until that time life had no moment. It was much the same, though much magnified, as the empty endless day before a long anticipated treat, before a ball.

So he wandered round the hotels and cure-houses and the little shops. Gastein is small. One can wander from end to end in

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ten minutes. And back. And back again. Neither the antlers on the Villa Solitude nor the wild bulk of the Grand Hôtel de l'Europe, nor the glass canopy of the art-nouveau fashion arcade, nor the damask and great brass hatpegs of the Mozart any longer entranced him. Finally he thumped the snow off his boots, entered enormous swing-doors, took a chair in an immense empty lounge and ordered a glass of active water.

The waiter—one waiter for a hundred empty chairs—approached and receded soundlessly on thick carpet. He came and went like a figure projected, magnified and then minimised, on a screen of empty air. All one side of the lounge was glass. A long way away rose a splendid view of the mountains. But inside at the tables one felt more the glass than the view—which lay back removed like a picture. Glassy cold light like water filled every corner of the lounge. Nowhere the comfort of a dark warm shadow.

Far away, through pillars and down marble steps, the majestic door occasionally revolved, a hushed conversation whispered at the desk with its shaded light, and some other lonely traveller passed on quiet carpets into tall corridors and away. Occasionally a bell buzzed somewhere: one expected, somehow, a sort of answer to this discreet summons; but none was heard.

De Broda's little bottle of water bubbled silently. But it made the only movement, and a fierce one, in the room. He himself sat absolutely still. He was engraved in the solitude—any movement would ricochet painfully in such quiet. The noise of movement would stamp too severely, then echo, then vanish to reinforce the vacuum: its shape of movement would jitter slyly in mirrors all around. For there were many mirrors—the great hall was built at a time when opulence mattered more than taste. Many styles were mixed—gilt, marbles, mirrors, plushes, brasses fought for stately precedence. It was indistinguishable from the hotel hall of a capital railway terminus anywhere. And in it de Broda began to feel as lonely as a waiting traveller. Of course, he was one.

He sighed to his glass of water. He looked round for a paper: there was none. He looked round to see if, finally, the great room was empty: it was. He looked down at his fingers—it might be an idea to manicure his nails: but they were already done. He thought he would run over whatever papers might be in his wallet, and he felt in his pocket: but it was not there. He remembered

—as one can know with instant certainty the difference between a lost and left wallet—leaving it in the hotel. But in this he was nearly saved. For a moment he became anxious. Ordering a drink without money! Would they think—? How would he convince them? But wearily the moment subsided, he had remembered how well known he was.

And minute by minute the loneliness grew—he could quite easily have called for a paper, but his mood and the silence forbade it—and that strange feeling of ‘having no name’ returned. Ludwig de Broda, he said it to himself, Ludwig de Broda. It seemed absurd—or less than that, meaningless. He looked down at his paunch. There was certainly someone there, a slimmish someone who kept unbuttoned the lowest button on his waistcoat, and that someone was as he knew himself. But was it Ludwig de Broda? No.

That Ludwig de Broda was a nothing. A little fearfully, the man in the chair tried to substantiate him. He racked his mind for scenes where de Broda had figured. The film, not in monotone as so often in a dream, but in full colour as flesh and clothes flashed across his mind. De Broda waving good-bye to a girl from the deck of a steamer leaving Budapest: de Broda in the Dolomites, a small lung-fresh figure alone with a huge view: and for no particular reason de Broda in a narrow alley in Vienna, and again at some party, and in a room full of flowers lifting the hem of a housemaid’s skirt, and so on. . . .

He watched this de Broda in flashes through his life—until he entered the last ten years, the years of æstheticism. And now as he watched that figure of himself in picture galleries, or watching the Belvedere die in the winter sun, or standing in a railway terminus evoking its rampant days—now the character of the figure converged with his own actuality in the sort of railway hotel lounge where he was sitting and he grew more apprehensive as still it stayed separate, seemed always to be someone else. He tried to shake the thought away, he sat up and concentrated on what was around him.

It was, of course, the hall of a railway terminus. That had dovetailed nicely: so then he shook the terminus away, and made himself see that he was in Bad Gastein and nowhere else. But rather than bringing him to his senses, this instead re-inforced the abysmal sense of loss into which he had drifted. For now again, examining a frieze of plaster amorini, feeling the long dusted drift



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of the great tasselled curtains, realising the brass double eagle worked into the fender by the great fireplace—he was again back in the past century. And, whatever melancholy pleasures he derived from the paradise past, he suffered three distinct and almost material losses whenever he thought of it.

First, the appalling notion that he had just missed all that—not by any acceptable stretch of time, such as hundred years—but by a single generation! He had just missed it—and this easily led to a feeling that it had been purposely done to him, that he had been left out.

Secondly, there was the suspicion that *life then had been all right*. As in our personal memories we usually tend to isolate and picture not times of distress but scenes of happiness or elation—how equally natural is it to conjure up and exaggerate the best of a whole period of the past! He saw in the decade of that brass double eagle only amplitude and finesse. It made today worse. So—he *had been robbed*, he was lost in the daylight present.

And thirdly, thinking of the *fin de siècle*, he had an impression always of people in groups, never single. The group of the family—when homes were spacious and by whole households lived in. And the larger groups of occasion: the full house of the opera, the fashionable drives of the Ringstrasse seemed to have been peopled not by individuals about their own pursuits but by a gathering of people framed in a picture of united purpose. And in the country, or in such an hotel as that in which he now sat, he saw large groups at the tables, parties of people always, and always at some height of laughter or private festival. Now, of course, there were no groups, there was neither fulness nor purpose. *There was only loneliness.*

But already it was one o'clock. An hour for luncheon, and it would be two o'clock. The long hours until he would see Laure again were lessening. He cheered up a little.

\* \* \*

After his bath, the day over, fresh and expectant, he was delighted to find Laure down in the lounge early.

Her orange head was bent over a writing-desk. When he went over to her she looked up happily. Her face still held the flush of the snows, she had the cool radiant certainty of a woman who



has just descended from the bedroom mirror. She looked up and smiled :

'I'm just writing home—to plead for another two days.'

'Good! Excellent!'

'What they'll say I don't know! Still, I'll risk it. You didn't know I worked in a shop, did you?'

'Well . . . no . . . you never told me. . . .'

Interesting. But de Broda was too pleased by this sudden present of a longer stay to pay much attention to it. Vaguely he thought of her as the manageress, the director of the shop: though he would in fact have scarcely been troubled by the knowledge of her more humble position. It was not unusual. Besides, his snobberies were of a different kind.

'It's a cake-shop,' she said. And with a flourish of signature, 'There! Either the mine goes up or it doesn't!'

She was in high spirits. They spent a pleasant half-hour together and then parted to dine. During dinner, exhilarated by her company after the lonely hours, he decided to make his proposal that evening. He was quite sure he was infatuated, he suspected it might be love. He considered where his words might best be said—over a bottle of wine in the Mozart? No. On the Wilhelm Promenade, with the great snowbound valley beneath? Mm. Or—or in a double-bath, perhaps? He chuckled. Then he thought of the high bridge over the waterfall. That was plainly the answer.

After dinner they had coffee together. Then, after some twenty minutes, Laure took out a mirror, patted her hair and said: 'Nine o'clock! I must go.'

Unconcerned her fingers smoothed the button on a gold lipstick case and the little red knob slid out. She raised it to her lips. For a moment de Broda could say nothing. He sat quite still, only his eyes widened in dread. Then he blurted:

'Going? Going? Going where . . .?'

'I have an appointment.'

'But—but I thought we were going to spend . . . you said . . .'

'Did I? But we made no arrangement.'

She was still looking in the mirror. Her fingers moved too steadily, her face showed too little expression—it was plain she avoided looking at him.

He leaned forward, grasped the arm of her chair:

'You said we could spend the evenings together. When we

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talked about your ski-ing. And tonight—tonight's very important . . .'

'Oh? How?'

'Well . . .'

'But look, Herr de Broda—or should I say Bobby? . . .'

Now she did look at him, her teeth and the little mirror's teeth smiling bright malice, and the red lipstick point like a sweet poison in between :

' . . . look, we're not exactly living together, are we? And you never said : "Fräulein Laure, I beg you to enchant me with your company between the hours of nine and twelve o'clock tonight!" No no! Nothing like that from Bobby! As a matter of fact, I'm going out to dance.'

'Laure!'

'Bobby!' she mimicked.

He got angry. He decided to put his foot down once and for all.

'Whom are you going out with?'

She frowned :

'That sounds rather a demand. Really, Ludwig!'

He gripped the arm of her chair harder and leant his pale face earnestly towards her. A touch of rose fevered his cheek-bones. He said very softly :

'Tell me!'

She laughed, a little frightened : 'Well—if you *must* know, its Peter.'

'Peter?' His voice rose. 'What Peter?'

'Peter Hörnli.'

He raised his eyebrows—his one joined eyebrow. Then drawled more comfortably : 'Oh him—the ski-boy.'

Her voice was sharp. 'And what's wrong with that?'

'Nothing.'

Then he leant closer towards her, he lost his anger, he spoke earnestly and sincerely :

'Laure, dear. Don't go. I've got—so much to tell you. Laure—Laure darling . . . I love you. I want you, Laure—I want you to be my wife.'

The lipstick dropped away. Her hardness dropped away. Her eyes softened, but she still frowned.

She just said : 'Oh.'

'Laure—put him off. I wanted to tell you—to ask you later. When we were walking somewhere . . . not here. But now I've

had to . . . Laure,' he took a deep and terrible breath, 'will you be my wife?'

She said nothing. Only her eyes searched his face anxiously, as though she were looking not for love but for a sign of illness—and carefully her hand was placing the lipstick on the table.

He went on, talking quickly: 'Laure—it's only Hörnli. You can easily leave a note. Do darling, write one now, we can go out the other way—he's calling for you I suppose?'

Slowly she said: 'But Ludwig—Ludwig—I—I can't marry you.'

His mouth pursed into a smile, as at some little puzzle he shook his head.

'No,' she said. 'I'm already engaged.'

She put her hand softly over his, it was no touch, it was a compress:

'Yes,' she said. 'To Peter Hörnli.'

His hand loosened on the arm of her chair. He looked simply puzzled.

'I'm so sorry, Ludwig.'

There was a small commotion by the inner swing doors: a stamping of snow, beating of gloves.

'There he is already! Ludwig, you don't want to meet . . . no . . . of course! No—I must go.'

She rose and left him. She did not look back.

De Broda sat quite still. More than anything—he was seized with wonder. He simply could not understand. An old feeling overwhelmed him—of being in class and not knowing the lesson. Blankly and almost casually, as if there was no hope of solving the problem, as if that Hörnli were a puzzle of white numerals on a black board, he tried to examine him. Standing there by the swing doors he looked young—unbelievably young. Could he then be not a boy but a man? De Broda had imagined him as eighteen or so. But he remembered how as one grows older ages in both directions become muddled—and saw he might be at least twenty-five, more. And his haircut—like an American advertisement. He was still in his ski-trousers, yet with some sort of belted loose coat: these were clothes de Broda could not understand, they came from another world. In fact, the New World—over his gestures, which were properly German-Swiss, there ran a veneer of American posture, frank agilities of the collegiate, laconicisms of the film. To de Broda's older culture such mannerisms were

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still confounding, though he had seen them extend through many European cities. But he deduced from them neither the levelling of false emotions nor the destruction of class patronage that at their best they represented—he deduced simply bad boorish manners. He saw only the bravo-me of it. It was alien to his heart.

So that now watching this Hörnli greeting Laure—with a strange nonchalant ease as if there were time only for the broadest smile, a large effusion all at once for they must be getting on, getting places—he was even more astounded that Laure should take such a man seriously. That brash boy with his easy smile? That cock-a-hoop young nothing? That figure of all unsubtlety, swaggerer of dance-halls, that sportsman?

That sportsman put on his hat at a gay angle and wheeled Laure, laughing Laure, through the swing doors and out. Slim-hipped, loose-shouldered, his back covered Laure like a curtain of a play, and then that too was gone and the vestibule left empty.

For some minutes de Broda was unable to gather himself. He had not moved, his face hung almost in a smile. It was unbelievable. Then slowly he rose and walked up the stairs to his room.

He went to the mirror. He looked at his face. It looked no different. At forty years he saw the face of thirty, the age-marks over the well-known shape he treated as no more than a mist on the mirror. He looked down at his hands—his slender, washed, workless fingers that could speak subtleties unknown to mouths. Further down—to the suit he wore, to its civil suavity, its politely traditional cut. To his shoes, sober and elegant. And up to the mind behind his face—a mind tutored in graces of good taste, a mind of knowledge and sometimes wit but always of culture and taste. Vain, he thought; quite a few faults, of course. But really—how *could* she?

It all seemed so absurd. There in his bedroom, alone, he gave a shrug to his shoulders and smiled. Then suddenly—half-way between the mirror and the bed—he stopped dead. Half-way across the bedroom carpet, isolated on that carpet, the full realisation of what had happened fell upon him. Its appalling echo rang round the room, sang in his empty ears. She had refused him! She had left him! She had preferred someone else to *him*! Nothing he could ever do would revise it. To him, *him*, she had preferred that boy. . . .

He grasped for his overcoat and left that room quickly. But at the head of the stairs paused—ashamed to be seen by the people in the lounge below. Then his shoulders straightened and he descended, went quickly through and out into the snow. It was a clear night, the snow glowed white everywhere. Sometimes a lighted window showed a yellow square, festive and telling of warmth within. But de Broda saw nothing, he did not know where he was walking. Through his mind there raced backwards the perspective of events—too clearly he saw the answers to questions he had chosen to ignore. The episode with that party from Vienna—of course that was what she really wanted: and her abrupt interest in the ski-run: and, most bitter of all, the way she had kissed him on that magic evening in the zither-tavern—he saw how this was no more than a kind of overflow of her exhilaration with Hörnli, it had been a gesture of gaiety embracing not him but the idea of love.

The snow made no noise beneath his slow trudging boots: he felt that love for him had passed forever. Past the mauve light of a Kurhaus, past a man hacking ice from a wooden sledge; the white road leading uphill looked as uneventful and empty as his own life would henceforth be. At least the road twisted, and it rose higher to some horizon . . . but his life? Nothing appeared there—only a level road, unposted, with neither turning nor end nor anything ever to happen on it. As he watched his dark boots on their lonely procession, as if they covered no flesh of his but were boots of a warder taking him along that road, he lost the last of his spirit. He felt old and finished.

He saw sadly that those two together told no more than an old and simple tale—youth to youth. They shared together energies and vitalities he would never know again. And they shared together a spirit of the times, an acceptance of the present that he would never understand, a modern spirit strange as a foreign language. A thousand small utterances of day-to-day life separated him from that bounciful, youthful spirit: they would not think twice of, say, the look of a bottle of medicine—whereas he would long for the scrolled designs of older ointments; they would drive to Grinzing on a motor-bicycle and love it: they would accept, accept, accept—yes, they would enter into things. How simple—yet how strange! How strange that however one might groom oneself, however fine a taste and a culture and a manner and all urbanity one might achieve—and however young one still



felt and even almost looked—one could never be accepted exactly as a fellow-being by youth.

The dark firs rose above him like bird-giants, their branches ridged like feathers, their topmost tufts sly as little heads. Ice on the road gleamed its cold. What might have been a magical winter's night looked only forlorn—it was a scene only of cold desolation. The wide valley stretched below, like something seen not now but in a long and snowbound time ago. De Broda lifted his eyes from his boots and looked curiously around him. He found those very boots had led him near to where that high bridge hung across the ravine and its rocky torrent.

Then two things happened. Small matters—but the kind that grow large in a grieving mind. Over the crest of the hill a motor came whirring its chains on the ice. It bore down towards de Broda. Quite normally he had to step to the side to let it pass. It passed, and, with its lights and air of company, disappeared. De Broda stood in the thick snow at the side of the road—again alone on a lonely road—and felt the motor had pushed him there with personal intent, with a jeer.

And then, when he had moved on a step, suddenly the door of a villa opened. It was a villa standing alone, and the door lay along a short path. But quite visibly in its rectangle of yellow light stood the figure of a woman. She leaned forward slightly, she seemed to be peering out on to the snow, perhaps on to the road, perhaps at him. Quite suddenly, she closed the door again : and all was again dark.

De Broda turned away and hurried towards the bridge.

His mind was quite made up. He hurried with his head butting forward, with his mind in fact bowed towards the bridge and away from all light and sound and people.

But not all sound : for there came towards him the dark shuddering murmur—at first only a vibration through the snow—of the water-fall. He hurried faster to meet it. Ice caked under his heels. He slipped, he lurched as he ran. He passed into the belt of firs that with their wet dark leaves guarded that place. Then his hands gripped wide on the wooden balustrade, he looked down. It was suddenly quite dark, a cloud passed over the moon.

Foam splashed white somewhere deep in the darkness, it was difficult to see where, it was like looking down to the bottom of a well. The rock-face fell vertically, stone echoed a watery roar through darkness all around ; yet there grew down the sides, on

every ledge, less like trees than something poisonous, the firs—dark-draped ladies suckled by rock and spray and shadows. Their arms dripped water. Sound of water echoed everywhere. Water flooded with the nightmare sound of a vast dam breaking, rearing its black smooth mass like a wall to pour down forever over everything.

De Broda stood there gritting his teeth, the muscles in his arms clenched ready. The sound below, the feel of flat water beneath hummed dragging at his mind, he leaned nearer the desirable, the terrible—then suddenly sobbed and flung himself on the ground. Breathing with fear, very slowly and carefully he crept off the little bridge on his knees.

He lurched up and stumbled into the surety of the trees: then stopped, and still breathing hard, looked back. The sound had receded, the bridge without its fall looked sure and graceful, a rustic affair among snowy firs. Without questioning himself, instantly bold again, he sneered at it within himself and began to return: but as the roaring sound grew he stopped, tried another step—then his heart altogether failed him, he turned and walked quickly away. Yet he refused to feel defeated. Vertigo, he thought. And quite natural. A matter difficult to imagine, easy to experience.

He reached the road, and heard voices. Two people were leaving the villa whose door he had seen open. Their voices came clearly across on the frosty air, he was instantly on his guard. Perhaps it had not been vertigo? Perhaps he had been simply afraid to finish what he had in mind? The doubt grew as those voices approached. He walked quicker to be ahead of them—not to be seen aimless, slinking off the road. The voices receded, he felt bolder. His figure straightened, he felt they could still see him, but they were safer and further away. He'd showed them—an abrupt blood of revenge rose and gritted his teeth. And with it came a sudden idea that turned his footsteps fast down towards his hotel. Water, he thought, there was water without vertigo, the place was running with water! Revenge then, on the waters, on the voices. Revenge the proud way, a Roman revenge!

Immediately he was indoors he ordered the bath and went to his washstand for a razor. He could even smile when he saw that of course there was only a safety razor. And the man's face engraved on the little packet of blades bore an expression hardly adequate to the situation. He tore the face off the packet, and extracted several blue-black, carefully greased little blades from their

#### EPISODE AT GASTEIN

envelopes. He wondered how many to take and then took two—with some idea of two wrists. He put the blades in his dressing-gown pocket and left for the bathroom.

The maid had already filled the bath. The water lay quite still. But it steamed slightly from its surface, it had a presence of movement like an animal asleep. When de Broda shut and bolted the thick white door he was alone with it, he was insulated from the passage and all sound and all people : such near-marine doors fit exactly.

Casually, almost as though he were in fact going to shave—for he moved slow under the weight of self-pity and revenge—he placed the two little blades down on the floor-edge of the bath. He took off his dressing-gown and approached the steps naked. The water in those square pools lies below the level of the floor, there are steps and a steadying hand-rail down into it : and thus de Broda had time, approaching the head of the steps, exactly to feel himself naked. He felt unprotected. He had a moment to realise that people must come eventually and find him thus. He paused in shame. He looked back along the tiles to his dressing-gown. But he had brought no underclothes in, it would mean drenching that gown. It was unthinkable. He turned again to the steps. So they'd find him naked? Well, the more shame on them, the more revenge.

And then down into the warm still water, down into the green receiver among the white clean tiles.

First to soak, to get heat into the veins. He lay back floating with his shoulders resting on the marble step. The bath was wide, the sense of luxuriance pleased him. This was fitting. He took a wrist from the water and examined it curiously. He had never noted it so closely before ; so hairless, such soft flesh : he saw how blue veins crossed above the tendons—so many brittle tendons, like the thin bones in a chicken's leg, with veins crossing them like soft blue bridges. He tried to remember where the pulse was, remembered not to use his thumb, found it ; and found his other hand holding his own wrist delicately as though it were someone else's. He had been five minutes in the bath. He turned to the razor-blades.

It was difficult to pick them off the tile. They lay flatly, they were sharp, he did not want to cut his thumb so he got one up with his finger-nails, his nails pincered it up like a magnet picking a weight of steel.

He held the little blade carefully. He remembered sharpening pencils with such double-edged blades, how they were greased and could slip back into the hand—and he pressed the ball of his thumb hard into the little range of slots to fasten his grip. That was in his right hand. Easing himself up to sit steadily on the step he raised his left wrist. He turned the underside of the wrist upwards—he felt for a moment he was looking at a wristwatch—and his eye wandered over the blade and saw the second one resting on the bathside. He saw that instinctively thinking of two wrists he had brought two blades. That was unnecessary, absurd—but it produced another problem. Which to cut first? Now that the right hand held the blade, and thus the left wrist should be the first to be cut—would not the left and weaker wrist be too weakened by the cut to manage the blade for the right? Perhaps the left hand should cut first—the stronger right one would withstand the wound better? Very carefully, careful not to cut himself, he exchanged the little blade between his fingers and thumbs.

But now holding it in his left hand—and feeling thus insecure, for the left was not used to such precise movement—a further trouble showed itself. It was very important to be both exact and quick: but that meant changing over the blade quickly and cutting fast with the right hand before it was weakened. Would it be shocked numb for those vital seconds? He thought—and then saw that after all his instinct had been right, there was no reason why he should not hold a second blade ready in the right hand. It would avoid the delicate change. He turned and, again very carefully, pincered the second blade off the tiles. Precariously holding the left hand away from his body, he nearly slipped. And that made him suddenly think: what if the shock made the right-hand fingers open and that blade dropped away down in the water?

He shook his head impatiently. That had to be risked. Main thing was to get on with it. Against his real will—which wished, since they were his own wrists, to cut carefully and tenderly—he told himself to do it quickly, to hold both hands in front in the air and then—slash quickly. With the movement of drumsticks. Like a man with butterpats. Quickly. One-two. He stretched out his hands, turned the right wrist inwards, held his breath and waited.

Waited for what?

A word of command.

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From whom?

For the first time he realised that word must come from himself and no-one else: he was absolutely alone with his own will.

The steam rose lightly on the water's surface, no more than a snaking of mist on the bath's green. The snow pawed silently on the black window above. Movement everywhere—but no sound. He felt no longer alone, but in a crowd of movers making no sound but restlessly waiting. And supposed he would make no sound either, razor-blades made no sound. Suddenly he saw himself sliding down after it was done, a splashing of water, the dark blood clouding round him in the water. He grew greatly afraid.

Afraid of what? Because he had to make his own hands move to do it? Was he afraid of decision? No, not him. He looked closely at the skin on his wrist, soft and so tenderly his own. He saw how his finger-pads were soaked in the steamy air and ridged like fresh-waved white sand, like dead skin. Abruptly then a new thought came from nowhere, a thought suddenly from the world lost outside the bathroom. Something whispered to him that Hörnli was a Swiss. A Swiss would own Swiss francs. And Swiss francs were very valuable. And he saw instantly for the first time what precisely he wanted to see—that the Swiss francs rather than Hörnli were what Laure wanted. Not the young man's potency but the potency of money! Only that . . . he understood well what a hard currency meant. So what was he so troubled about? *He* was not preferred, this was something quite different. . . . With abounding relief he lowered a little his hands. He let out his tense breath. And lay there feeling for the first time the old pleasant warmth of the bath.

But a doubt was there. He held hard on to this new bright belief, but deeper in his brain a dark and troublesome doubt assembled like a cloud. He held hard, he concentrated on the idea of Swiss francs. His chin came out—and abruptly and proudly a new thought came. He decided to find out. He would go against all his principles—he would go out dancing with them, to a beer cellar with them, and by God he would go up in the ski-lift! Yes, and he'd even ski! He'd stay with them at all their games and find out!

Then—he saw himself up at the ski-station. He saw clearly. He watched, as the minute passed and he saw what would happen pass like a bright film through the minute . . .



He saw himself up there by the hut, dressed for snow. He saw exactly how he was dressed, and how it was a bright and sunlit day, and how he was buckling on his skis among a merry crowd of people buckling on theirs. Much colour against the snow, much excitement. The air was crisp and the crowd of them were ready for the day's sport. Laure and Hörnli were not yet there. He himself had gone up early. He wanted to be there ready for them. And he was cunning enough to know that he needed practice, he needed quite a time on the nursery slopes. He was out of practice by a good many years.

But people were moving off, the white slopes were a dapple of gnome colour—people as small as children, suddenly a child as big in perspective as a grown-up. All dressed the same, it was difficult to make out . . . and he balanced himself upon his sticks and walked sliding easily off.

But as soon as a slope came he was down. He had difficulty getting up. One ski slid one way, the back of the other caught in the snow and remained sticking up helplessly. Yet he managed to struggle upright. Then off for a few metres . . . and down again. This time worse.

He struggled with all his strength. His hat fell off. A child of five swerved easily past him. He was dreadfully knotted. But, sweating now, he did finally force himself up. He went veering on. Knees together, feet wider and wider, all awkwardness, no figure of a man. And collapsed again. Voices shouted: 'Achtung! Achtung!' And through his snow-filled eyes he seemed to see voices swear as they swerved past him. He was just in the way. Painfully again he tried to get up. He got up. But he was facing the wrong way. Then to turn. Putting that one leg awkwardly up and round. But in mid-turn the other leg slid away—and once more he was down in a baffled mess. He was finished. He knew he would never get out of this, never get back to land. He was right back in the first days of learning, humiliated and tired and useless. . . .

He sat up panting, a clown-figure tangled and snow-drenched. And just then he heard his name: 'Ludwig!' He listened and looked vaguely up back the slope and an echo came, a laughing echo: 'Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!'

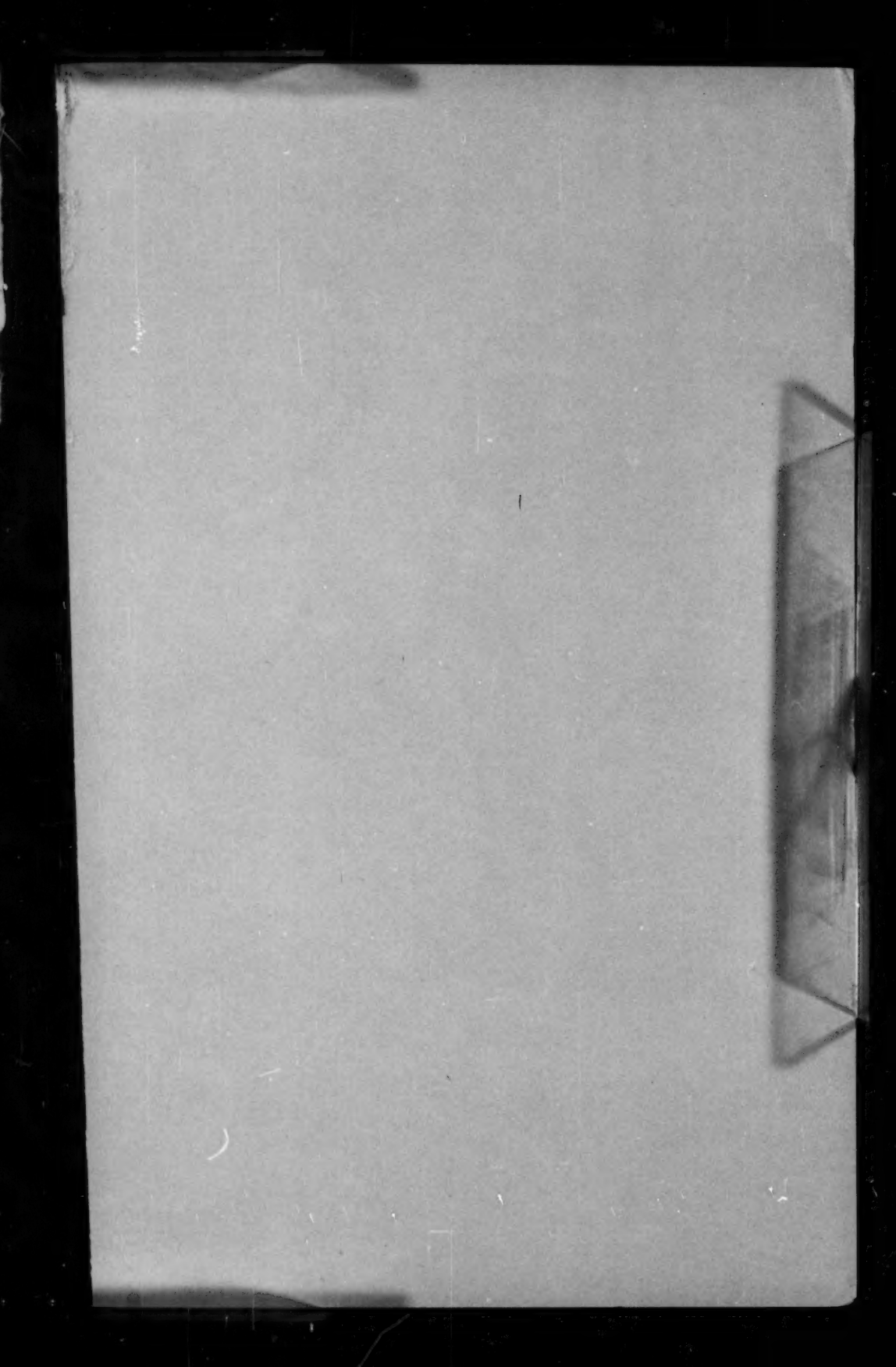
Up above he saw Laure and Hörnli pointing at him and waving and laughing. Then together, as they saw him looking at them, they prised on their sticks and came sweeping down the slope.

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Together, as though they were linked, they passed where he was and smiled and called goodnaturedly: 'Ludwig! Enjoy yourself! Good-bye . . . good-bye . . .!' And they were past.

He watched them, the pair, sure as a couple can be, ski-ing beautifully down the long white slope, then up another, over again and across the wide snow-field, always smaller, further, smaller—until together they passed away over the mountainside and were gone.

De Broda sat absolutely still in the hot water, a little razor-blade held in each hand like the parts of a child's broken toy. And slowly two tears, two big single tears dropped from his eyes, dribbled over his cheeks, and fell down into the other water beneath.



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